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*Ambiguity and Masculinity in Roman Visual Culture*

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# The Image of Priapus: Ambiguity and Masculinity in Roman Visual Culture

Katherine-Ann Dunleavy



A dissertation submitted to the University of Bristol in accordance with the requirements for award  
of the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the Faculty of Arts

School of Classics

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## Abstract

From the first century BCE the image of Priapus increased in popularity in Roman visual culture. Although rarely depicted in public art, Priapus' representation was ubiquitous in domestic and personal contexts. However, this imagery has largely been overlooked because of its decorative and highly sexual nature.

This study re-evaluates these disregarded images and explores the popularity of images of Priapus, with particular reference to the masculine culture of Roman urban settings. Previous work has tended to catalogue but here Priapus' image is approached thematically in relation to rural fertility cult, apotropaic laughter, domestic luxury and mythical landscapes. Specifically, this study looks at the relationship between images of Priapus and discourses about tradition, indulgence, foreignness and performance. As a man-made deity, Priapus occupies a unique position in the visual language of mythology which allows him to blur the boundaries between the human world and distant, imagined landscapes. He is, therefore, an expression of the Roman tendency towards artificiality in art, architecture and day to day life.

This study will show that by contextualising images of Priapus in the dominant culture of the time the images can provide insight into the social tensions and anxieties of the patrons, and viewers, of these artworks. This thesis will demonstrate that representations of Priapus reflect key elements in the construction of Roman male identity, including the balance between Roman tradition and Hellenistic influence, and between aggressive masculinity and sophisticated effeminacy.



In memory of John Dunleavy.



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## **Declaration**

I declare that the work in this dissertation was carried out in accordance with the requirements of the University's Regulations and Code of Practice for Research Degree Programmes and that it has not been submitted for any other academic award. Except where indicated by specific reference in the text, the work is the candidate's own work. Work done in collaboration with, or with the assistance of, others, is indicated as such. Any views expressed in the dissertation are those of the author.

SIGNED: ..... DATE:.....



## Contents

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<b>List of Illustrations .....</b>	<b>i</b>
<b>Introduction .....</b>	<b>1</b>
Main Themes .....	3
Ambiguity .....	4
‘Elite’ Roman Males .....	6
Material.....	10
Why is this Thesis Important? .....	17
Structure .....	17
<b>Chapter One: Fertility and Rusticity .....</b>	<b>20</b>
Fertility in the Image of Priapus.....	23
Abundant Fruits .....	24
The Phallus .....	27
Payne Knight, Frazer and ‘Primitive’ Fertility Cults.....	30
A Brief History of Priapus in Scholarship.....	32
‘Others’ and Origins .....	39
Sex and Obscenity.....	41
Morality.....	44
Greek Origins and Roman Contexts .....	47
Priapus and the East .....	49
Priapus and the ‘Cultural Revolution’ .....	51
Images of Cult Activity .....	55
The Creation of the Rustic Image.....	63
Rural Life .....	65
A Timeless Part of the Landscape .....	68
Conclusion.....	72
<b>Chapter Two: Protection and Humour .....</b>	<b>74</b>

Apotropaism .....	75
Portable and Functional Objects.....	80
Liminal Spaces .....	85
Frontality and Confrontation .....	89
Humorous Apotropaic Images .....	95
Elite Laughter .....	101
Urban versus Rustic .....	102
Masculine versus Feminine.....	108
Romanness versus Greekness.....	113
Freedmen versus Elite.....	117
Conclusion.....	120
<b>Chapter Three: Luxury and Eroticism .....</b>	<b>122</b>
Luxury in the Roman World .....	123
Luxury and Morality .....	129
Priapus and <i>Convivia</i> .....	132
Drinking and Dining.....	134
Status and Dining .....	139
Luxury and Roman Power .....	143
Hellenism .....	143
Eroticism .....	150
Effeminacy.....	161
A Luxurious Afterlife .....	168
Conclusion.....	173
<b>Chapter Four: Landscapes and Performance .....</b>	<b>175</b>
Roman Landscapes.....	177
Rusticity and Sophistication.....	181
Luxury.....	191
Ambiguous Frames .....	201

Gardens and Landscape .....	204
Performance and Landscape.....	220
Conclusion.....	232
<b>Conclusions .....</b>	<b>234</b>
Summary .....	234
Possible Future Work.....	235
Contribution to Knowledge.....	236
<b>Bibliography .....</b>	<b>238</b>

## List of Illustrations

---

<b>Figure 1:</b> Fresco from the House of the Surgeon, Pompeii (VI.6.10). 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Naples; National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Mattusch, 2008: 158. ....	1
<b>Figure 2:</b> Bronze fulcrum of the Amiternum Couch. 1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE. Rome, Capitoline Museum.	
Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 148. ....	20
<b>Figure 3:</b> A painted Priapus from House II.9.1 at Pompeii.	
Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.org/R2/2%2009%2001%20p2.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.org/R2/2%2009%2001%20p2.htm</a> [accessed 18/04/17]. ....	24
<b>Figure 4:</b> Bronze statuette of Priapus holding children. 1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.	
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1035.....	25
<b>Figure 5:</b> Marble statue of Priapus. 2nd century CE. Barcelona, Museum of Archaeology.	
Photo: Euan Martin.....	25
<b>Figure 6:</b> Bronze Priapus statuette in the <i>anasyrma</i> pose. Private collection.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20164/lot/78/">http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20164/lot/78/</a> [accessed 28/11/14]. ....	25
<b>Figure 7:</b> Stone Priapus figures. Cologne, Roman-Germanic Museum.	
Photo: Borger and Schmidt-Glassner 1977: 186.....	25
<b>Figure 8:</b> Limestone Priapus panel. Aquileia, Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.ubi-erat-lupa.org/monument.php?id=13978">http://www.ubi-erat-lupa.org/monument.php?id=13978</a> [accessed 05/12/16]. ....	27
<b>Figure 9:</b> Bronze statuette of Priapus sprinkling his phallus from Herculaneum. 1st century CE.	
Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Varone 2000: 23. ....	28
<b>Figure 10:</b> Copper statuette of Priapus in <i>lordosis</i> pose. London, British Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=828008&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=1">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=828008&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=1</a> [accessed 12/05/16]. ....	28
<b>Figure 11:</b> An image plate from <i>A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus and its Connection with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients</i> showing Priapus statuettes and gems.	
Photo: Payne Knight 1865: Plate V. ....	33
<b>Figure 12:</b> Drawing from Famin showing the sacrifice of a virgin to Priapus.	
Photo: Famin 1816: Plate VIII.....	34
<b>Figure 13:</b> Print showing a woman and a phallic herm from ‘Mes Loisirs’ published in 1764.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=33010617+&amp;cr=257&amp;cl=1">http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=33010617+&amp;cr=257&amp;cl=1</a> . ....	41
<b>Figure 14:</b> Drawing of Roman sarcophagus from Famin.	
Photo: Famin 1816: Plate VII.....	42

<b>Figure 15:</b> Painted Ivory showing group sex and a statue of Priapus. 18th century. Private collection.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=40110111+&amp;cr=16&amp;cl=1">http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=40110111+&amp;cr=16&amp;cl=1</a> . ....	43
<b>Figure 16:</b> Details of a marble base showing Priapus with Bacchic figures. Early imperial. Rome, Vatican Museums.	
Photo: Stewart 1997: 580. ....	48
<b>Figure 17:</b> Marble relief showing a Priapus statue harvesting grapes. Early imperial. Rome, Vatican Museums.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.scalarchives.com/web/dettaglio_immagine.asp?idImmagine=0076139&amp;posizione=5&amp;inCarrello=False&amp;numImmagini=23">http://www.scalarchives.com/web/dettaglio_immagine.asp?idImmagine=0076139&amp;posizione=5&amp;inCarrello=False&amp;numImmagini=23</a> [accessed 28/04/18]. ....	54
<b>Figure 18:</b> Fresco of a man sacrificing to Priapus from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/rv/villa%20mysteries%20p22.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/rv/villa%20mysteries%20p22.htm</a> . [accessed 15/04/18]. ....	56
<b>Figure 19:</b> Sardonyx cameo. Imperial. Paris, National Library of France.	
Photo: <a href="http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/794?vc=ePkH4LF7lZVNrsIwDI SvEnEBao_t2sdhyQ69-y_eFyQQEisWozaeL5P-pPV3e7q8Oohfft1-9H9PEa3p-Hn7b8dKSVvITNaaBEhU5ErcEarIXwG7_xG7">http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/794?vc=ePkH4LF7lZVNrsIwDI SvEnEBao_t2sdhyQ69-y_eFyQQEisWozaeL5P-pPV3e7q8Oohfft1-9H9PEa3p-Hn7b8dKSVvITNaaBEhU5ErcEarIXwG7_xG7</a> [accessed 15/03/18]. ....	57
<b>Figure 20:</b> Carnelian gem. 1 <sup>st</sup> Century CE. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.	
Photo: <a href="https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/59665/">https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/59665/</a> [accessed 18/05/18]. ....	58
<b>Figure 21:</b> Marble relief with Priapus and Bacchus in archaic style. 2nd century CE. Private Collection.	
Photo: Nilsson 1957: 100. ....	59
<b>Figure 22:</b> Brown jasper gem with yellow ground. Cambridge, Corpus Christi Lewis Collection.	
Photo: Henig. 1975: 77. ....	60
<b>Figure 23:</b> Statue of Priapus. Imperial. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/statue-of-priapus-151204">http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/statue-of-priapus-151204</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. ....	63
<b>Figure 24:</b> Glass gemstone showing a Priapus herm and a man milking a goat. 1st - 3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=397532&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=2">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=397532&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=2</a> [accessed 20/02/17]. ....	65
<b>Figure 25:</b> A marble relief showing Priapus in a landscape. 1st century CE. London. British Museum.	
Photo:	

<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=460021&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=roman+marble+urn&amp;page=1">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=460021&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=roman+marble+urn&amp;page=1</a> [accessed 28/04/18].	68
<b>Figure 26:</b> Fresco from the House of the Lovers in Pompeii (I.10.11). Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Jashemski 1979: 131.	69
<b>Figure 27:</b> Priapus fresco from the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1).	
Photo: <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus_Fresco.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus_Fresco.jpg</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	74
<b>Figure 28:</b> Wall plaque of a phallus from <i>insula</i> VI.6 at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Sailko - <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30949683">https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30949683</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	77
<b>Figure 29:</b> Terracotta statuette depicting the 'evil eye'. 1st-2nd Century CE. London, British Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=464027&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=phallus&amp;page=5">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=464027&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=phallus&amp;page=5</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	77
<b>Figure 30:</b> Wooden Priapus from the Plainer A shipwreck. Marsilles, Roman Dock Museum.	
Photo: Neilson. 2002: 250.	78
<b>Figure 31:</b> Silver cup with fishing scene. 1st century BCE. Avenches, Roman Museum.	
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1033.	79
<b>Figure 32:</b> Silver mirror showing Priapus and erotes. 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Mattusch 2008: 118.	79
<b>Figure 33:</b> Amethyst gem showing Priapus. 1st - 3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=437429&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=1">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=437429&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=1</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	80
<b>Figure 34:</b> Bronze key found at an imperial era villa near Muttentz. Aarburg, Heimatmuseum.	
Photo: LIMC: 1035.	82
<b>Figure 35:</b> Pottery Lamp showing Priapus. 2nd century CE. London, British Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=433127&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=2">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=433127&amp;partId=1&amp;searchText=priapus&amp;page=2</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	82
<b>Figure 36:</b> Bronze lamp. 1st - 2nd century CE. London, British Museum.	



Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=799613001&objectId=431679&partId=1#more-views](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=799613001&objectId=431679&partId=1#more-views) [accessed 28/04/18].  
..... 83

**Figure 37:** Interior views of the *lupanare* at Pompeii (VII.12.18).

Photo: <http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2012%2018%20p2.htm>  
[accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 84

**Figure 38:** Fresco of Priapus from the *lupanare* at Pompeii (VII.12.18).

Photo: <http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R7/7%2012%2018%20p2.htm>  
[accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 84

**Figure 39:** Marble Priapus fountain from the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1).

Photo:  
<http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20entrance%20p9.htm>  
[accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 87

**Figure 40:** Glass Medusa cameo. 1st - 2nd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=433334&partId=1&searchText=medusa+cameo&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=433334&partId=1&searchText=medusa+cameo&page=1) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 89

**Figure 41:** Terracotta Priapus. 1st-3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=421219&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=421219&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 91

**Figure 42:** Bronze Hermaphrodite statuette. 1st-3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=465381&partId=1&searchText=hermaphrodite&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=465381&partId=1&searchText=hermaphrodite&page=1) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 93

**Figure 43:** Bronze Priapus. 1st century CE -2nd century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=464024&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=464024&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 93

**Figure 44:** Fresco of Pan and Hermaphroditus from the House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii (VI.9.6).

Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: <https://plus.google.com/115214651498864827293/posts/E2dHjotvxJx> [accessed 28/04/18].  
..... 94

**Figure 45:** Bronze Priapus lamp. 1st century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=431680&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=431680&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 97

**Figure 46:** Drawing of a terracotta drinking flask found in Herculaneum. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: Varone 2000: 47. .... 99

**Figure 49:** Detail of Priapus in a fresco from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: <http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/rv/villa%20mysteries%20p22.htm>. [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 105

**Figure 50:** Bronze Priapus/actor statuette. Colchester, Colchester and Essex Museum.

Photo: Hutchinson 1983: 605. .... 106

**Figure 51:** Marble architrave relief from Domitian's Villa at Castel Gandolfo. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.

Photo: LIMC 2009: 1035. .... 108

**Figure 52:** Priapus, Hercules and Omphale fresco from the House of Marcus Lucretius at Pompeii (V.4.a). Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.

Photo:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hercules\\_and\\_Omphale\\_\(House\\_of\\_Marcus\\_Lucretius\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hercules_and_Omphale_(House_of_Marcus_Lucretius).jpg) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 111

**Figure 53:** Marble Hermes Statue. 4th century BCE. Olympia, Archaeology Museum.

Photo: <https://www.britannica.com/topic/Hermes-Carrying-the-Infant-Dionysus>. [accessed 28/04/18]. ..... 115

**Figure 54:** Silver 'Vicarello Goblet'. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE-1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Cleveland, Museum of Art.

Photo: [www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 122

**Figure 55:** Bronze vase with Priapus and shrine. Avenches, Roman Museum.

Photo: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/small-bronze-vase-with-bacchic-scenes-gallo-roman-news-photo/182126219#/small-bronze-vase-with-bacchic-scenes-galloroman-civilisation-muse-picture-id182126219> [accessed 17/05/14]. ..... 126

**Figure 56:** Marble krater showing the visit of Bacchus. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museums.

Photo: Euan Martin. .... 128

**Figure 57:** Silver *skyphos*. 1-30 CE. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Photo: [www.mfa.org/collections/object/two-handles-cup-skypos-with-bacchic-scene-45948](http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/two-handles-cup-skypos-with-bacchic-scene-45948) [accessed 15/04/18]. ..... 135

<b>Figure 58:</b> Silver cup. 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Princeton, University Art Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/38924">www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/38924</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	135
<b>Figure 59:</b> Onyx 'Ptolemy Cup'. 1st Century BCE - 1st Century CE. Paris, National Library France.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection?vc=ePkH4LF7ZZbbbcNADARbYQniU2QXbsJ_CRlgacp1uLEMA9gw4I-FdNy5pSQc7vR2PNkeTy8f8Lmw7VSx05BLmng1t4ESFTorRtQZrsH">http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection?vc=ePkH4LF7ZZbbbcNADARbYQniU2QXbsJ_CRlgacp1uLEMA9gw4I-FdNy5pSQc7vR2PNkeTy8f8Lmw7VSx05BLmng1t4ESFTorRtQZrsH</a>	
[accessed 15/04/18].	136
<b>Figure 60:</b> Bacchus and horn of plenty painting from House II.9.1 at Pompeii.	
Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.org/R2/2%2009%2001%20p2.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.org/R2/2%2009%2001%20p2.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	137
<b>Figure 61:</b> Doorway of House II.1.12 at Pompeii.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R2/2%2001%2012.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R2/2%2001%2012.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	139
<b>Figure 62:</b> Banqueting fresco from House of the Chaste Lovers at Pompeii (IX.12.16).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R9/9%2012%2006%20p5.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R9/9%2012%2006%20p5.htm</a>	
[accessed 15/04/18].	141
<b>Figure 63:</b> Bronze Bacchic Cup. Paris, National Library of France.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/21925?vc=ePkH4LF7jZU7DsJADESvsulCxN_Yx6Gki7h_wTNSliQailGynrez-Wzi3_Z0OzuITqP6f4Pcf5_R13u4vg_dZemuyFbosixOHQVKtCNqBVZgZQi_8Au_8Gv">http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/21925?vc=ePkH4LF7jZU7DsJADESvsulCxN_Yx6Gki7h_wTNSliQailGynrez-Wzi3_Z0OzuITqP6f4Pcf5_R13u4vg_dZemuyFbosixOHQVKtCNqBVZgZQi_8Au_8Gv</a>	
[accessed 16/04/18].	143
<b>Figure 64:</b> Fresco with Priapus and Galatea from Herculaneum. Naples, National Archaeological Museum.	
Photo: <a href="https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/acis.html">https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/acis.html</a> [accessed 28/04/18].	145
<b>Figure 65:</b> Ceramic cup with Venus, Priapus and Eros. 2 <sup>nd</sup> century BCE. Princeton, University Art Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/18587">www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/18587</a> [accessed 28/04/18].	148
<b>Figure 66:</b> Detail of the satyr on the 'Vicarello Goblet'. 1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE-1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371">www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371</a> [accessed 28/04/18].	149
<b>Figure 67:</b> Sardonyx cameo of Bacchus, Ariadne and Priapus. 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/venus_adonis.jpg">www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/venus_adonis.jpg</a> [accessed 28/04/18].	152

<b>Figure 68:</b> Fresco of Mars and Venus from the House of Mars and Venus, Pompeii (VI.9.47). Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/marte_e_venere%2c_da_casa_di_marte_e_venere_o_delle_nozze_d%27ercole_a_pompei%2c_9248%2c_01.jpg">https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/marte_e_venere%2c_da_casa_di_marte_e_venere_o_delle_nozze_d%27ercole_a_pompei%2c_9248%2c_01.jpg</a> [accessed 28/04/18].....	152
<b>Figure 69:</b> Silver medallion with Venus and Priapus. 1 <sup>st</sup> century BCE- 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Berlin, Altes Museum.	
Photo: <a href="http://smb-digital.de/emuseumplus?service=direct/1/resultlightboxview/result.t2.collection_lightbox.\$tsptitlelink.link&amp;sp=10&amp;sp=sollection&amp;sp=fieldvalue&amp;sp=0&amp;s">http://smb-digital.de/emuseumplus?service=direct/1/resultlightboxview/result.t2.collection_lightbox.\$tsptitlelink.link&amp;sp=10&amp;sp=sollection&amp;sp=fieldvalue&amp;sp=0&amp;s</a> [accessed 18/04/18]. .....	154
<b>Figure 70:</b> Venus in a Bikini from House I.11.6 at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeological Museum.	
Photo: Feder 1978: 105. ....	154
<b>Figure 71:</b> Marble sarcophagus showing Priapus in Acteon myth. Paris, Louvre.	
Photo: Zanker and Ewald 201: 296. ....	156
<b>Figure 72:</b> Gem with Bacchus and Priapus. Paris, National Library of France.	
Photo: <a href="http://medaillesantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/7320?vc=epkh4lf7lznrsiwdisvenebao_t2sdhyq69-y_efyqqeiswozael5p-pp3e7q800j55zcncv1-rh_v4f19-gnlt0da6uvvnazkohe1bos">http://medaillesantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/7320?vc=epkh4lf7lznrsiwdisvenebao_t2sdhyq69-y_efyqqeiswozael5p-pp3e7q800j55zcncv1-rh_v4f19-gnlt0da6uvvnazkohe1bos</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	158
<b>Figure 73:</b> Amethyst imitation gem with Priapus and Eros. 1 <sup>st</sup> -3 <sup>rd</sup> century CE. London, British Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=435505&amp;partid=1&amp;searchtext=priapus&amp;page=2">http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=435505&amp;partid=1&amp;searchtext=priapus&amp;page=2</a> [accessed 15/04/18].....	158
<b>Figure 74:</b> Fragment of a marble relief showing Priapus with a mirror. Rome, Vatican Museums.	
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1037.....	161
<b>Figure 75:</b> Fresco depicting Priapus and erotes from House VII.4.59 at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1037.....	161
<b>Figure 76:</b> Painting of Venus and Priapus from House I.13.16 at Pompeii.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2013%2016%20p2.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2013%2016%20p2.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. ....	163
<b>Figure 77:</b> Marble 'satyr play relief'. Rome, Capitoline Museum.	
Photo: Euan Martin.....	165

<b>Figure 78:</b> Marble Sarcophagus showing a harvest. Late 1st Century CE. Rome, National Roman Museum.	
Photo: Euan Martin.....	168
<b>Figure 77:</b> Side detail of a marble sarcophagus showing Acteon myth. Paris, Louvre.	
Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 296. ....	169
<b>Figure 78:</b> Detail of Marble sarcophagus of Marconiana Severiana from Vigna Casali. 3rd century CE. Los Angeles, Getty Museum.	
Photo:	
<a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus_Maconiana_Severiana_Getty_Villa_83.AA.275.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus_Maconiana_Severiana_Getty_Villa_83.AA.275.jpg</a> [accessed 28/04/18].....	170
<b>Figure 79:</b> Marble sarcophagus with Bacchic Scene. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 241. ....	171
<b>Figure 83:</b> Silver cup from the Boscoreale Treasure. 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. Paris, Louvre.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.louvre.fr/en/mediaimage/goblets-aux-squelettes-0">www.louvre.fr/en/mediaimage/goblets-aux-squelettes-0</a> [accessed 28/04/18].....	173
<b>Figure 84:</b> Fresco with myth of Polyphemus from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/r1/1%2007%2007%20p4.htm">www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/r1/1%2007%2007%20p4.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. ....	175
<b>Figure 85:</b> Polyphemus fresco from the Villa at Boscotrecase. Late 1st century BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum.	
Photo: <a href="https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/20.192.17/">https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/20.192.17/</a> [accessed 28/04/18]. ....	184
<b>Figure 86:</b> Fresco of a sacral idyllic scene from the villa at Boscotrecase. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Pompejanischer Maler um 10/20 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons [accessed 15/04/18]. ....	186
<b>Figure 87:</b> Painted wall of <i>Cubiculum</i> 16 at Boscotrecase. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.	
Photo: <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco-Boscotrecase.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco-Boscotrecase.jpg</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. ...	187
<b>Figure 88:</b> Marble panel of rustic scene with Priapus. 1st century CE. Munich, Glyptothek.	
Photo: Wünsche 2016: 159.....	188
<b>Figure 89:</b> Marble relief with Priapus and Pan. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.	
Photo: Sailko [CC BY 3.0 ( <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/</a> )], from Wikimedia Commons [accessed 15/04/18]. ....	189
<b>Figure 90:</b> Marble plaque with reclining couple. 1 <sup>st</sup> century CE. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museums.	
Photo: Euan Martin.....	192

<b>Figure 91:</b> Marble plaque with Hercules and Priapus. 1st Century CE. Boston, Museum and Fine Arts. Photo: <a href="http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/relief-with-herakles-and-omphale-or-a-nymph-151119">http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/relief-with-herakles-and-omphale-or-a-nymph-151119</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	194
<b>Figure 92:</b> Fresco of Polyphemus and Galatea from the House of the Coloured Capitals at Pompeii (VII.4.31). Naples, Archaeology Museum. Photo: De Caro 2012: 20.	195
<b>Figure 93:</b> Terracotta plaque with Nile scene. Copenhagen, NY Carlsberg Glyptothek. Photo: Euan Martin.	196
<b>Figure 94:</b> Fresco of a sacral-idyllic landscape from the Temple of Isis, Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum. Photo: Wolfgang Rieger [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons [accessed 19/04/18].	197
<b>Figure 95:</b> Fresco on the east wall of room 9, House of the Ceii, Pompeii (I.6.15). Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2006%2015%20p5.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2006%2015%20p5.htm</a> [accessed 19/04/18].	200
<b>Figure 96:</b> Detail of the Polyphemus Fresco from House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7) Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p4.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p4.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	202
<b>Figure 97:</b> Detail from a wall painting at the House of the Priest Amandus in Pompeii (I.7.7). Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p3.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p3.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18].	202
<b>Figure 98:</b> Marble decorative panel from the House of the Coloured Capitals at Pompeii (VII.4.31). 1st century BCE – 1st century CE. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology. Photo: Mattusch 2008: 14.	205
<b>Figure 99:</b> South view of the peristyle of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii (VI.15.1). Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20peristyle%20p3.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20peristyle%20p3.htm</a> [accessed 19/04/18].	206
<b>Figure 100:</b> Marble Bacchus in the peristyle of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii (VI.15.1). Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20peristyle%20p3.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20peristyle%20p3.htm</a> [accessed 19/04/18].	207
<b>Figure 101:</b> Fresco of a satyr from the peristyle at the House of the Vettii, Pompeii (VI.15.1). Photo: <a href="http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20peristyle%20p2.htm">http://pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R6/6%2015%2001%20peristyle%20p2.htm</a> [accessed 19-04-18].	208
<b>Figure 102:</b> View from doorway of the House of Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1) which lines up with the peristyle.	

Photo: <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus_Fresco.jpg">https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus_Fresco.jpg</a> [accessed 15/04/18].....	210
<b>Figure 103:</b> Fresco from the Temple of Isis at Pompeii. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.	
Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0, <a href="https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37429203">https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37429203</a> [accessed 15/04/18] .....	211
<b>Figure 104:</b> Painting 6 from the peristyle of the House of the Gladiators at Pompeii (V.5.3).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R5/5%2005%2003%20p7.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R5/5%2005%2003%20p7.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	212
<b>Figure 105:</b> Painted hunting vignette from House VI.15.8 at Pompeii.	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/r6/6%2015%2008%20p3.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/r6/6%2015%2008%20p3.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	214
<b>Figure 106:</b> Corridor F-G at the Villa Farnesina. Rome, National Roman Museum.	
Photo: Amphipolis (National Museum 46) [CC BY-SA 2.0 ( <a href="https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/">https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/</a> )], via Wikimedia Commons [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	215
<b>Figure 107:</b> Detail of panel in corridor F-G, Villa Farnesina. Rome, National Museum.	
Photo: Spencer 2010: 151.....	216
<b>Figure 108:</b> Icarus fresco from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p3.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p3.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	219
<b>Figure 109:</b> Perseus and Andromeda fresco from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p4.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p4.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	219
<b>Figure 110:</b> North wall of the <i>triclinium</i> of the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p3.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/R1/1%2007%2007%20p3.htm</a> [accessed 15/04/18]. .....	219
<b>Figure 111:</b> Mask detail. Fresco depicting Galatea from Herculaneum. Naples, National Archaeological Museum.	
Photo: <a href="https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/acis.html">https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/acis.html</a> [accessed 28/04/18].....	223
<b>Figure 112:</b> Stone statue of Priapus and a gladiator found at a tavern in Pompeii (I.20.1).	
Photo: <a href="http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/r1/1%2020%2001.htm">http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures/r1/1%2020%2001.htm</a> [accessed 28/04/18].....	227
<b>Figure 113:</b> Bronze gladiator helmet found at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Nilsson 1957: 86. ....	228
<b>Figure 114:</b> Detail of marble Pan and Daphnis statue showing the pan pipes. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	

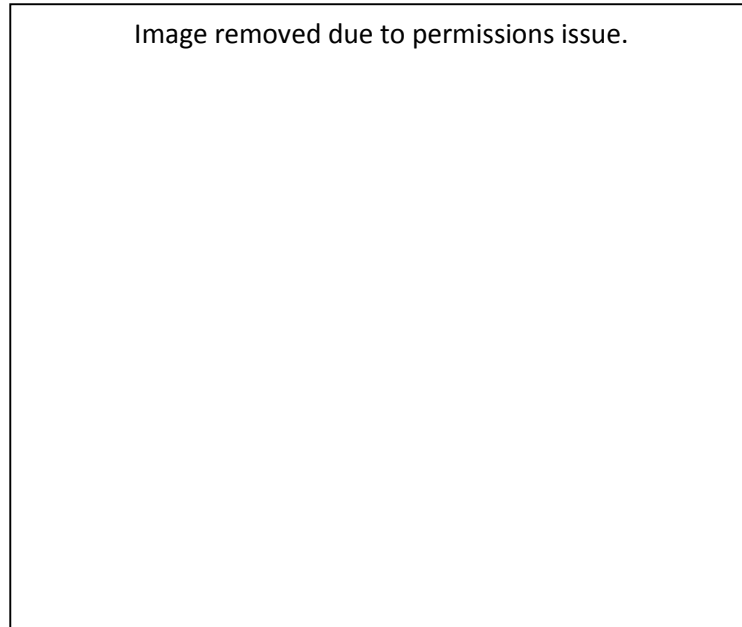
Photo: <a href="https://greekgodpan.wordpress.com/category/pan-artworkphotography/page/4/">https://greekgodpan.wordpress.com/category/pan-artworkphotography/page/4/</a> [accessed 28/04/18]. .....	230
<b>Figure 115:</b> Silver Pan and Priapus. 1st century BCE - 1st century CE. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.	
Photo: Mattusch 2008: 120. ....	231



## Introduction

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*A bailiff carved me from a shapeless log and said to me 'You are Priapus'<sup>1</sup>*



**Figure 1:** Fresco from the House of the Surgeon, Pompeii (VI.6.10).  
1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Naples; National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Mattusch, 2008: 158.

A painting from a room adjacent to the garden in the House of the Surgeon at Pompeii (VI.1.10) shows a woman painting onto a panel a herm of Priapus, which is standing to the right of the scene. Two women watch her from a corner and a young boy, possibly Eros, assists holding the panel (Figure 1).<sup>2</sup> Time has faded this image but it is still possible to make out the pillar bottom half of Priapus' herm, his unkempt beard and the way he lifts his garment around his waist. Behind this scene is a doorway showing a garden with a herm, perhaps another Priapus. In this scene we see two very distinctive features common to many representations of Priapus; the overt display of an erect phallus and a man-made quality, usually manifested in a herm-like shape. Perhaps unsurprisingly, the phallic nature of these images has garnered most attention; however, it is as a figure that reflects the concerns of the human world that created him that this crude and outlandish god is most revealing of Roman culture. As here, his image is typically represented as a mature man

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<sup>1</sup> *Priap.* 10 in this quote I am using Smithers and Burton (1995) translation as I feel it captures the immediacy of the creation of Priapus well but throughout this thesis I generally use the translations of Parker (1988) unless stated otherwise.

<sup>2</sup> Mau 1973: 282 suggests that this figure is Eros but it is difficult to tell from the current image quality.

with unkempt hair, loose fitting clothing and, often, an eastern flavour in his dress. Overall his image tends to be unsightly, antiquated and unruly.

Priapus, a minor god primarily associated with the protection of gardens and orchards, was particularly popular in Roman art from the first century BCE through the early imperial era and played a significant part in the art and literature created during an intense period of social change as the republic collapsed, the principate was established and the empire continued to expand and confront other cultures, creating opportunities across social classes. This thesis looks at visual representations of Priapus to ask how they were used in the context of cultural anxieties around 'masculinity', 'foreign influences' and 'tradition' brought about by an expanding empire and political and social changes from the first century BCE onwards.

This painting from the House of the Surgeon raises many possible questions about the image of Priapus, how he was perceived by the Romans and how he integrated into their spectrum of artistic motifs. In this thesis, the main question I aim to address is why the image of Priapus came to play a large part in the iconography of personal objects and domestic art even though as a deity he had no state cult and was not depicted in public spaces. I will ask why the image of Priapus, although crude and rustic in appearance, was so popular within a sophisticated urban elite culture from the late republic onwards, and explore how this god, whom we usually associate with the rustic and ancient past, might better be understood in terms of the shifting nature of Roman cultural values. I will also consider the reasons for the portrayal of Priapus as a man-made object, a herm rather than an autonomous and active deity, in most depictions.

This painting very much belongs to the urban culture of Pompeii, as do many works featuring Priapus, which can seem incongruous with the rustic iconography of a god of eastern origins. Therefore, it is important to understand the significance of Priapus in discourses about foreignness, luxury, and urbanity which were prevalent in the art and literature of this era. This thesis will focus on Priapus as an image of fertility and piety, an apotropaic symbol deeply rooted in Roman concepts of good fortune and humour, an indicator of luxury and escapism, and a marker of the civilising presence of man in landscapes. In each chapter, we will see how within these themes the artificial rusticity of Priapus' image is used to conceal, reveal or interrogate different aspects of Roman culture.

Reviewing Herter's *De Priapo* in 1932, H.J. Rose praised the distinction Herter makes between 'the naïve naturalism of the god's original cult, the witty if somewhat risqué trifling of the Alexandrian and Roman poets, and the sheer filth of some degenerate monuments, literary, graphic and plastic'.<sup>3</sup> This typifies the approaches to images of Priapus throughout scholarship from as early as the eighteenth century to the present day; primitive rural god, insignificant titillating decoration or perverted obscenity. This thesis aims to show that images of Priapus were in fact a sophisticated, witty and highly self-aware commentary on many facets of Roman culture and used the tropes of archaic cult, eroticism and decadence to question contemporary *mores*.

## Main Themes

There are two significant ways in which the image of Priapus contributes to the discourses of the late republican and early imperial period. Firstly, he is an ambiguous figure associated with liminal spaces and the boundary between materiality and artificiality, imbuing his image with power and allowing it to represent fluid ideas and values. Secondly, he might also be explored as a key figure in interrogating what it means to be Roman at this time and, specifically, how one constructs the identity of an elite man in the Roman world. Although Priapus has been the subject of scholarly study before, his place in urban visual culture has been overlooked and, therefore, so have these significant components of his cultural relevance.

As a deity, Priapus has been of interest to scholars since the eighteenth century when influential works by Richard Payne Knight and César Famin explored the fertility associations of his cult and attempted to explain his unusual appearance, but this interest was always controversial and was not sustained. The last comprehensive monograph dedicated to images of Priapus was published by Hans Herter in 1932.<sup>4</sup> This was an attempt to catalogue the imagery and texts. Since scholarship of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries has influenced more recent approaches to his image, and has, arguably, contributed to the lack of sustained academic study of Priapus generally, the first chapter of this thesis will look at the history of writing about Priapus in some detail.

Since Herter's publication, representations of Priapus have largely become a footnote in works that look at phallic imagery or sexuality in the ancient world, in which the treatment of the image generally conforms to a series of clichés about Priapus that are repeated time and time again. The *Priapea* and other literary representations of Priapus have received significantly more attention but they primarily focus on linguistics and poetic *personae* rather than the place of Priapus' image in

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<sup>3</sup> Rose 1932: 158-159.

<sup>4</sup> Herter 1932.

Roman culture.<sup>5</sup> Recent work by Peter Stewart, who published an article on Priapus in *Art History* and later incorporated this into his book on Roman statuary, has highlighted the potential for a deeper exploration of the image of this maligned figure.<sup>6</sup> Stewart's work stresses Priapus' status as a man-made figure and an inferior work of art. There has also been a recent PhD thesis by Aisla Hunt, with the main argument published in an article, which focuses on Priapus as a wooden, rustic image.<sup>7</sup> These ideas will be expanded on throughout this thesis but in addition we will also look at the complexities of his status and show that he was not always conceived of as 'inferior' but was actually a fluid and sophisticated emblem that could represent many things. Specifically, we will contextualise the images in Roman culture and identity focusing on the ambiguous nature of his image and the relevance for elite masculine status.

## Ambiguity

Priapus in both art and literature is deliberately difficult to pin down; he invites multiple interpretations and offers multiple contradictions. These are vital to understanding his place in Roman culture. Priapus' image is associated with liminal spaces, both in the positioning of physical representations, for example in doorways or gardens, and in the landscapes he inhabits within representations. It is this ambiguity and liminality that provides so much room for cultural dialogue within Roman visual culture. We will see that ambiguity manifests itself in many ways throughout this thesis, but it is always present providing a moment for potential disruption.

As a god concerned with protection it is fitting that Priapus is located on the edge of what is considered normal. Both his physical location, which seems to have chiefly been orchards, doorways and gardens (the points at which domesticity and wilderness meet), and the physical extremes of his body called upon to protect patrons and define boundaries. In Roman painting statues of Priapus are often portrayed as part of idyllic landscapes and his image fits the world evoked by these landscapes which bring together nature and civilization, suspended reality, exaggeration and liminality. In the 'real world', he is very much a god associated with the outdoors but he exists on the edge of the human world occupying the boundaries near to property and gardens. The painting from the House

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<sup>5</sup> For example, O'Connor 1989 is an in depth study of the *Carmina Priapea*; Holzberg 2005 looks at the theme of impotence in the poems; Habash 1999, Frazel 2003, Uden 2007 and Uden 2010 specifically deal with Priapus in other literature; there is also a large body of work discussing Priapus in the *Satyricon* such as Baldwin 1973, Hamer 2008 and Richlin 2009.

<sup>6</sup> Stewart 1997 and 2003.

<sup>7</sup> Hunt 2011.

of the Surgeon reminds us of this; although he is depicted indoors, he is on the cusp with the garden distinctly visible behind.<sup>8</sup>

In both art and literature, Priapus is repeatedly specifically designated as a statue, even when he is being addressed as a deity; often appearing as an artwork within an artwork or fantasy scene, his status raises questions about ways of viewing and the power of the image in the Roman world.<sup>9</sup> In this painting we see Priapus in the *anasyrma* pose (drapery lifted around his waist to reveal his ithyphallus) atop a stone block with a square, herm-like bottom half.<sup>10</sup> The *thyrsus* he carries marks him out as belonging to the Bacchic retinue, although he displays none of the rigour and dynamism of frantic maenads or drunken and lustful satyrs who often make up the *thiasos*. However, he can sometimes be more active in mythological contexts, as we will see in Chapter Three.

The image of Priapus as a stationary object is complemented by the *Priapea* where this figure of aggression, threats and coarseness is also man-made, inactive and impotent. Although the statues of other gods are sometimes written about and examined by Roman authors it is rare to find another god so defined by their image and the artist who has created it. Stewart argues that the basic, herm representations of Priapus single him out as ‘bad art’, a humorous foil for sophistication and luxury.<sup>11</sup> Although, this is certainly one element in the characterisation of Priapus, he is often also part of the luxury world of mythological landscapes and Roman dining practices; therefore, his image must have meaning on multiple levels for the discerning viewer.

The stationary nature of Priapus often makes him a by-stander to the action, an audience or voyeur.<sup>12</sup> In this sense he both represents the viewer in the image and raises questions about who is watching whom. The gaze evidently has a significant part to play in the composition of this painting (Figure 1), since it specifically presents a series of views and images within images; the painter views the statue, the women in the corner watch the painter, the viewer sees the whole scene. Here the gaze between the painter and statue is notably direct and raises questions about whether the statue is in fact looking back. Authors such as Pausanias tell us of the religious intensity of cult practices in which the initiate comes face to face with a statue of the god, and there are episodes throughout Roman art and myth that emphasise the danger of the gaze and of being drawn into the reality of a

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<sup>8</sup> This painting was also displayed in a room that opened onto a garden and would have mirrored that view to some extent. For a discussion of the House of the Surgeon see Guidobaldi 2002 and McKay 1976: 36-8.

<sup>9</sup> Elsner 1996a; Elsner 2007b.

<sup>10</sup> Chapter One will provide an overview of different poses of Priapus.

<sup>11</sup> Stewart 1997.

<sup>12</sup> There is a large body of work on the gaze in art relevant to discussions of audiences and voyeurism, for example Bartsch 2006 and Bryson 1983.

stationary object, suggesting that viewers engaged deeply and directly with works of art.<sup>13</sup> Shadi Bartsch and Jás Elsner have both emphasised the importance of viewing in Roman culture, showing that the gaze was essential to asserting and controlling status, particularly as the socio-political environment changed social boundaries and made display even more important.<sup>14</sup>

### ‘Elite’ Roman Males

As a phallic male deity used in urban contexts, Priapus’ image seems to speak most directly to culturally elite Roman men. Identity and status in Roman culture were fluid and determined by taste, behaviour and appearance; the elite men who created the cultural milieu examined in this thesis include the wealthy and those who had the education to contribute to artistic culture.<sup>15</sup> They are defined by a shared cultural language and the aspiration to prove themselves as one of the influential men of society in Rome and the provinces. This thesis does not seek to examine individuals but the culture they built to define themselves and so we will use material from both prestigious contexts, such as luxury villas, and those lower down the social scale that seek to emulate them.<sup>16</sup> In looking specifically at the significance of Priapus for an educated audience who would understand the literary references and allusions to Hellenistic precedents, I do not mean to suggest that others would not have used images of Priapus in a variety of other ways. In particular, it will become clear that the culture of educated elites was adopted and emulated by groups of different social positions. Focusing on the wealthy, educated and those who directly emulated them in order to climb higher in the cultural hierarchy will allow us to get the most understanding from the tensions between urban and rustic, crude and sophisticated, and masculine and effeminate.<sup>17</sup>

In order to understand fully the culture established by this select group and to contextualise the images of Priapus it is necessary to engage with work that examines Roman culture. In recent years, there has specifically been an interest in examining Roman culture and masculine identity in the context of the so-called ‘Augustan revolution’. As a result of the redefinitions of that revolution, Andrew Wallace-Hadrill explores how ‘Being Roman’ came to rely less on active citizenship and more on symbols of social distinction. Significantly, he suggests that the conditions for such a cultural and

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<sup>13</sup> Paus.10.32.18, for example, tells of an initiate who died after going into a shrine; Elsner 2007b; Zanker 1988.

<sup>14</sup> Bartsch 2006; Elsner 2007b.

<sup>15</sup> Edwards 1993: 13 argues that high status could come from ancestry, wealth, achievements and/or culture.

<sup>16</sup> Newby 2016: 22 challenges the notion that there is a clear divide in values between the aristocracy and everyone else, suggesting a common set of social values; Platts 2010: 239/40 Emphasises that owners of villas could come from a range of backgrounds, they were not necessarily the literary elites.

<sup>17</sup> Hales 2003 shows that art helped individuals to assume an identity and create a status that would allow them to participate fully in society.

social revolution were created not by the person of Augustus but over a longer period by the conquest of the Mediterranean.<sup>18</sup> Similarly, Karl Galinsky has argued for an 'evolution' rather than 'revolution' as the conditions that led to many changes under Augustus were already set in motion before his ascension to power.<sup>19</sup> Therefore, the scope of this thesis begins at the beginning of the first century BCE when many of the social changes tracked by these scholars began to take effect. This will allow us to examine how these wider social changes had an impact on identity and how this, in turn, affected artistic production.<sup>20</sup>

There has also been a growing interest in Roman identities and social display. Emma Dench has made a strong argument for the importance of 'culture' and 'self-definition' in understanding Roman society from the late republic onwards and Catharine Edwards has explored how shared cultural values were constructed through debate and censure.<sup>21</sup> A significant aspect of that cultural definition was the relationship to other ethnicities, particularly the Greeks, and there has been some important work in this area by Dench and others, such as Zahra Newby and Erich Gruen.<sup>22</sup> It will be vital to understand these relationships in order to comprehend the use of a deity of eastern origins such as Priapus, and the Hellenistic worlds he is usually depicted in, in Roman cultural discourse.

Priapus often seems emblematic of the conflict Romans constructed between 'Romanness' and 'Hellenism' (though, of course, this tension was complex as the ways in which Romans depicted and discussed their past were highly indebted to Hellenistic models).<sup>23</sup> Priapus is originally an eastern god and seems in Roman art to have become quickly subsumed into both depictions of Roman traditional agricultural landscapes where his manliness and hardness come to the fore, and luxury Hellenistic mythological landscapes where his connotations of Bacchic excess and abundance are highly significant. We will see throughout this thesis that Roman identity was not an easily defined single entity but multifaceted, fluid and pulled in many different directions by competing traditions and influences. Once in the Roman repertoire the standard motifs of Hellenistic art become

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<sup>18</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008.

<sup>19</sup> Galinsky 1996.

<sup>20</sup> Griffin 2005; Zanker 1988; Others, for example Silberberg 1980: 43, assert that changes in domestic decoration was 'Augustan propaganda', however, I think it is clear that there is not a direct correlation more of a change in taste influenced by wider cultural changes rather than specifically the wishes of the imperial family.

<sup>21</sup> Dench 2005; Edwards 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Newby 2016; Gruen 2011.

<sup>23</sup> Edwards 1993: 23 argues that Hellenistic models and education were a way to assert elite status and compete with peers.

saturated with the complexities of defining contemporary values, masculinity and urban culture.<sup>24</sup> Rather than straightforwardly adopting a Greek lifestyle, Roman men selected and modified the elements that best suited their self-presentation and Newby has shown that mythological landscapes and figures were an important tool in this.<sup>25</sup> The use of Hellenising styles is not always an attempt to depict something 'Greek' but rather a choice to use a style appropriate to depict something 'other' or just outside of the realm of lived experience. In fact, the Greek styles are often used to create a mythological 'history' for the late republican and early imperial Romans keen to create an identity based on Roman rural tradition. Similarly, Priapus features in Egyptianising styles and taken together the use of artistic motifs emblematic of conquered cultures are part of a cultural dialogue of appropriation and power.

Priapus' crude, rustic appearance is in stark contrast to the sophisticated art and literature in which he appears and so he is often used to parody and critique high-brow art whilst simultaneously reinforcing it. This mirrors the use of his image in contexts that seem to polarise country and city. This can take two forms: an idealisation of the rural world which claims the luxury of the urban world leads to degenerate morals and a lack of traditional Roman values; or mocking of the countryside as crude and unsophisticated. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger have shown that in times of social change there is a tendency to look to the past and, to some extent to 'invent tradition'. We see this in the Roman world as writers and artists begin to praise a mythical past with better morals. In fact, Alain Gowing has applied this approach to the Roman context and suggests that at this time the past was 'wholly defined' by the present.<sup>26</sup> As an urban figure deliberately constructed to look like a rustic deity and a crude looking motif inserted into luxury wares in urban homes, Priapus lay at the heart of these inventions.

Edwards has argued that Roman status was subject to constant renegotiation and that codes of behaviour helped to create a social hierarchy.<sup>27</sup> Above all else, it was the duty of the Roman male to remain in control of himself, those directly under his influence such as family and slaves, and those under the auspices of the growing empire. Priapus clearly reflects the notion of masculine dominance and control through his oversized phallus used as a weapon to dominate and punish others. However, the depiction of Priapus as ugly and rustic suggests that he lacks the refinement to

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<sup>24</sup> Wyler 2006 shows that the appropriation of Hellenistic styles both creates a universal style and displays the global dominance of the Roman Empire.

<sup>25</sup> Newby 2016.

<sup>26</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; Gowing 2005: 2.

<sup>27</sup> Edwards 1993: 16-17.



balance the responsibility of tradition and the cultural need for display and performance and, as such, we also see Priapus mocked and satirised. For example, since it was important for Roman men to demonstrate power and control over others, including women, it is interesting that in the depiction from the House of the Surgeon, Priapus is being looked at, one might even say objectified, by women in a reversal of the usual situation in Roman wall painting (Figure 1). He is the partly nude figure unable to escape the gaze of the painter and possibly also the women watching from the background. Essentially we are here seeing a room in which the women hold all the power and are the active figures while the only depiction of an adult male is completely passive; trapped in stone and moved into an unfamiliar setting.

One of the ways in which masculine dominance was asserted was through sexual power. Marilyn Skinner has clearly outlined these mechanisms of sexual control and argues that phallic symbols became metaphors for power because social status and sexual power were so closely associated in the Roman imagination.<sup>28</sup> Priapus is often visually associated with this kind of power, both through his phallicism and the images in which he is represented, and this is reinforced by the aggressive sexual threats in priapic literature. Amy Richlin has been highly significant in pushing forward the debate around obscene and invective literature, moving the conversation away from Foucauldian models to concentrate on a feminist perspective that considers how such literature reflects practices in society, considering the position of the subjects of the literature as well as the writers.<sup>29</sup> Priapus is also used to show the contrary position. Just as he could be mocked, so could powerful Roman men: an accusation of effeminacy was a particularly powerful tool in social competition and Skinner reminds us that violating masculine codes, and thus losing one's manhood, was always a danger.<sup>30</sup>

The liminality and ambiguity of Priapus' image allow him both to represent and subvert boundaries, cultural traditions and notions of masculinity. This makes him a highly significant figure in understanding Roman identity at a time of political and, more importantly, social change. As the empire expanded, luxuries flooded the market and a growing number of Romans could become wealthy and educated. Representations of Priapus began to increase, reflecting the tensions brought about by these powerful social changes.

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<sup>28</sup> Skinner 2005: 196.

<sup>29</sup> Richlin 1992b.

<sup>30</sup> Skinner 2005: 212-248.

## Material

Significantly, this thesis will use images of Priapus from a variety of items and contexts that are often overlooked. Priapus frequently features on small personal items such as gems, statuettes and tableware; objects which have traditionally been neglected in favour of mythological paintings and public monuments. By focusing on these items, and considering them to be of equal importance to larger, public art works in their potential to aid our understanding of Roman culture, I hope to get a better overview of the significance of Priapus' image than has previously been achieved. Over the last 30 years there has been a significant shift in this area and writers such as Paul Zanker and Elaine Gazda have specifically focused on the decorative and domestic. Following their example, this thesis will not only focus on domestic and decorative arts but will also seek to understand the multiple messages carried in such art works.<sup>31</sup> It is also important to move beyond aesthetic judgements which often dismiss 'ugly' characters like Priapus. As Alfred Gell argues in his anthropological approach to art, it is necessary to appreciate the production and reception beyond just the aesthetics in order to understand the social context of art.<sup>32</sup> John Clarke, who has examined sexual images in art and domestic decoration, both of which are pertinent to this thesis, also argues that it is essential to contextualise Roman art in order to understand the relevance for Roman viewers, and Zahra Newby emphasises that the display and response to art was a 'critical element' of self-fashioning.<sup>33</sup> These approaches suggest that the art of the domestic and personal sphere is, therefore, an important context for understanding the role of art, and, specifically, representations of Priapus in Roman culture.

The material in this thesis is based on a survey of over 300 images of Priapus. Although not a comprehensive catalogue, this does represent a good overview of the available material, including many images previously overlooked or not catalogued as including Priapus. Some scholars dispute the labelling of various images as a representation of Priapus in an attempt to limit images into several types with consistent features. Since this thesis aims to show that the image of Priapus was ambiguous, complex and used in a wide variety of artistic contexts, we will accept a broad interpretation of what makes an image of Priapus, recognising that some images may have been

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<sup>31</sup> Zanker 1988; Gazda 2010.

<sup>32</sup> Gell 1998.

<sup>33</sup> Clarke 2003 and 1998; Newby 2016: 145.

conceived by artists as a general phallic god and others as the Priapus from contemporary literature with a range of other options in between.<sup>34</sup>

In the Roman world, Priapus is depicted on a wide range of personal and domestic objects, often these are small and portable – just under 30% of the objects surveyed were gems or personal amulets and a further 28% were portable domestic objects such as drinking cups, lamps or statuettes. The small, domestic nature of these objects has often led to them being disregarded, but this thesis will treat them as works of art equally significant to mythological wall painting or large sculpture. This will allow us to understand what choices Roman patrons made when purchasing items for themselves and their homes, and understand the extent to which Priapus imagery was ubiquitous in all aspects of life. The nature of these objects suggests that Romans would have been surrounded by images of Priapus in the home, they would have seen him on cups at meal times, on the lamps that they used every day and even carried him with them on the jewellery they wore. We can also assume that, because images of Priapus were found on so many domestic and personal objects, they would have been seen by all members of the household; women, children and slaves, as well as by elite men. As we will see in some of the examples used in later chapters, the materials and manufacture of some objects suggest that they would have been available to people with a range of incomes and social status.

These small objects complement grander decorative schemes that account for around 35% of the objects surveyed, where we find Priapus depicted in frescoes, marble plaques and other decorative sculpture such as stucco. We also find Priapus in larger statues, but these are less common than the more intimate objects and tend to be later in date, from the second century CE onwards. We also begin to see Priapus depicted on sarcophagi from the second century CE when burial became standard practice, we will discuss these images in detail in Chapter Three, but it is notable that in these contexts he is consistently part of a Bacchic retinue or a mythological landscape and always a statue. This is one context in which we rarely find the humorous, aggressive Priapus from literature.

The majority of the images used in my analysis do not have a provenance and even fewer have a specific findspot that would allow us to draw conclusions about the context. This is largely due to their portable nature and the collecting habits of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. However, where we can pinpoint a location we find that the majority of images come from Italy, and within that a considerable majority are from the Bay of Naples. It is likely that this concentration is due to

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<sup>34</sup> Stewart 1997 narrows his images of Priapus based on limited attributes and suggests some artists may have thought of a phallic god as a generalised type.

the better preservation of objects, and particularly decoration such as paintings, in that area. However, the material from Italy suggests that Priapus was depicted in similar ways and on similar objects in different regions of the peninsula. Beyond Italy, most objects are personal, largely gems and statuettes or amulets found in the UK, France, Eastern Europe and Turkey, but the depictions show the same themes, namely fertility, apotropaism and piety through phallic aggression, abundance of fruits and rural cult imagery. Amulets and aggressive statuettes of Priapus, which we will look at as apotropaic images in Chapter Two, seem particularly focused in Egypt, where they are made of terracotta, and sites of probably military occupation, such as forts in the UK.

The proliferation of representations of Priapus is a sign of the popularity and significance of the images beyond their Italian context to those emulating Roman culture across the empire. It is also notable that the majority of images are from urban contexts and this will play a significant role in the analysis of the themes of this thesis. Recently, there has been some fascinating work that looks to understand urban contexts and Pompeii in particular; for example Hartnett has looked at social interactions on Roman streets, Milnor has looked at graffiti and Hales focused on urban housing. These works stress the importance of the urban environment as a location for social interaction and cultural display.<sup>35</sup>

Across all types of object and geographical location, we find Priapus depicted as a statue: over 65% of the sample that had a bottom half were clearly statues (as we see in the rectangular stone that makes up the lower part of Priapus in Figure 1) and a further 10% had a bottom that, although defined as two legs rather than a herm-like block, were so straight and close together they suggest we should imagine them as the carved legs of a statue rather than those of a living being.<sup>36</sup> In most instances where Priapus is depicted as living, he seems to be emphasising his power as fertility deity or apotropaic force and appears as a single figure in a small plaque or statuette holding fruit or revealing the phallus in an *anasyrma* pose. As a statue he is shown alone, as part of mythological scenes, as a cult object in rural settings and with other deities (especially with Venus who often leans against his statue).

Scenes in which the statue of Priapus is treated as a cult object are a significant subset of the images, 80 objects in this sample feature Priapus as a statue with an altar, shrine or worshippers, and half of those scenes decorated gems, ranging from glass-paste to expensive stones. Although this is a

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<sup>35</sup> Hartnett 2017; Milnor 2014; Hales 2003.

<sup>36</sup> Some of the images in the sample are fragmentary or damaged so it is not possible to tell what the lower part looked like.

significant theme on gems, cult scenes were found on a wide array of objects, including silver cups, wall painting, couch fulcra and a gladiator helmet, suggesting it had a relevance in many contexts and we will examine this more closely in Chapter One. There are many reports of wooden cult statues in literature but they do not survive in the archaeological record, making it impossible to tell if they were a significant type of real, physical image or merely a literary and artistic motif; Chapter One will also address these issues. Despite the lack of evidence for actual cult practices or worship of images of Priapus there is a large body of imagery from domestic, urban settings showing a cult. As a result, we will not look for evidence of cult in the material; instead we will explore the visual association with piety, the countryside and the past as one of the reasons for the popularity of the images in their contexts.

There are difficulties in looking at the image of Priapus, largely related to the survival of material. It is difficult to tell how much priapic imagery has been lost due to distaste for the 'immorality' of the images but there are examples of censorship and much of the extant pieces were hidden for many years in 'secret cabinet' style rooms.<sup>37</sup> As suggested by the quotation from Rose's review of Herter, the issue of morality has also traditionally made writing about Priapus difficult for scholars who were expected to maintain a distance from any 'obscenity', therefore this thesis will explore the ways in which such issues have affected modern scholarship, addressing some of the preconceptions that have hindered the study of these images.

Images of Priapus show some correlation with the themes of the Latin literature. However, they go much further. Therefore, this thesis will focus on the images and use the literature to draw out possible themes and meanings, rather than using the images to support interpretation of the literature. Literature is not part of everyday life in the way that these objects and images are; it is important as we analyse them that we think of them as tangible parts of domestic life that people purchased, carried and interacted with in multiple ways. This unique approach of engaging with all images, especially those of so-called 'minor arts', will allow us to understand the significance of Priapus in the culture of the Roman world in the late republic and early empire. Although others, such as Herter and Stewart, have focused before on the image of Priapus in sculpture and wall painting, by including here these so-called 'minor' objects and exploring them in detail, this thesis makes a significant contribution by showing the extent to which the themes in literature were

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<sup>37</sup> For example a Priapus and maenad statuette in the British Museum and another version in the Metropolitan Museum seem to have had the phallus removed to make the male figure more Bacchus-like, and drawings from eighteenth century travellers to Italy, such as Élie-Honoré Montagny, show the phallus removed in drawings of statues of Priapus. See also Beard 2012a and Fisher and Langlands 2011 on secret cabinets.

prevalent in domestic arts, but also how the literature only presents part of the picture. Using small artefacts shows that familiarity with Priapus goes far beyond those who commissioned wall paintings or read literature. This thesis seeks to build a more comprehensive picture of how the image of Priapus was used in the Roman world than has been attempted to date. Stewart has investigated the crude appearance of Priapus, Herter discussed the types of image and their religious connotations and Hunt has looked at the evidence for wooden statues of Priapus; this thesis will go further in exploring the many media in which Priapus was portrayed and the many ways these images could be used and interpreted.

Although this thesis is primarily based on the material evidence, with the images leading the discussion, it is necessary to contextualise the images and there are several pertinent contemporary literary sources. The literature that specifically references Priapus spans several genres. On the surface this literature appears to be crude and base humour but it is also sophisticated, full of witty allusion to Hellenistic and Roman models.<sup>38</sup> Through the image of Priapus, Roman literature mocks its own loftiness and critiques the contemporary world. The most famous literary depictions of Priapus are the *Priapea*, a series of Latin poems featuring Priapus either narrating or being directly addressed by a worshipper or passer-by. These poems were probably written in the second half of the first century BCE and have been attributed to an array of Roman authors as well as to select groupings of writers.<sup>39</sup> The Priapus in these poems is primarily an object, like the one being painted in the House of the Surgeon, a statue placed somewhere by an owner, rather than a 'living' god. Whilst highlighting the crude construction of the statues and the humble offerings he receives, the poems emphasise the rusticity of Priapus through highly sophisticated literary techniques showing that they are most likely not the notes composed by passers-by that they sometimes claim to be.<sup>40</sup> In priapic literature, as in art, we are presented with the image of a rustic statue by urban dwellers playing with the contradictions of bawdiness and piety that the object suggests.

One of the most famous pieces of Roman literature to feature Priapus is Petronius' *Satyricon* from the late first century CE. Unusually, Priapus is cast as a god taking revenge upon those who have denigrated his cult. The exaggeration and playful humour of this work provides a useful context for

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<sup>38</sup> Hunter 2006 explains that borrowing and allusion were as much a Roman 'tradition' as anything else.

<sup>39</sup> Parker 1988: 32-36 for detailed discussion of authorship and date. The *Priapea* come from a variety of sources, all of approximately the same date; the *Carmina Priapea* is a collection of 80 poems in Latin, in addition the *Virgilian Appendix* contains several *Priapea*. I will also include poems by other Latin authors, such as Horace, Catullus and Martial, with Priapus as the speaker or dedicated directly to him.

<sup>40</sup> For example, in the second poem of the *Carmina Priapea* the poet claims to have written onto Priapus' temple wall and in poem 49 Priapus asks the reader not to take offence at the poems pinned to his walls.

understanding the place of Priapus' image in the Roman world. The mere inclusion of Priapus, who is a comical character in much literature, suggests that the story aspires to be absurd. Significantly, even in his most active role in Roman literature, Priapus is not seen and is potentially nothing more than a figment of the protagonist's imagination.<sup>41</sup> Yet the outrageousness of the *Satyricon* relies on the sophistication that runs through it, essentially creating a very erudite joke for educated elites. This use of the crude to create refined comedy reflects the sophisticated ways in which the image of Priapus is often used in visual culture.

Elegy by Propertius and Tibullus of the late first century BCE will also inform the discussion in several chapters as it displays many of the same cultural ambiguities as the image of Priapus as well as frequently referencing his statues and sphere of influence. Contemporary literature that deals with the pastoral world, for example Virgil's *Eclogues*, will be particularly prominent as it is here that the tensions of which Priapus is emblematic are most evident. A variety of other Roman literature, ranging from history to satire, will be introduced throughout to contextualise the visual image of Priapus as this will allow a greater understanding of the culture that created, and replicated, the images.

Two themes dominate the literature that features Priapus; the garden or landscape, and phallic aggression (or the lack of it). As we will encounter these themes throughout this thesis, it is worth briefly summarising how they are used to characterise Priapus in Roman literature, and how this provides a context for the images that form the body of material presented here.

As a rustic god it is of little surprise that Priapus is associated with outdoor space. Sometimes this space is imagined as a pastoral landscape of lush greenery and singing shepherds and Priapus is a feature of this landscape from Hellenistic poets in the third century BCE through the Roman era. However, in Latin literature, especially in the *Priapea* and satire, Priapus is often imagined to belong in a garden. Details of the gardens are usually sketchy but he is explicitly described as a 'ruddy orchard guard' and caretaker of 'fruitful gardens' in the *Priapea*.<sup>42</sup> The main function ascribed to Priapus in gardens is to protect the crops from thieves, which he does by threatening them with his 'weapon', his phallus. These threats are highly aggressive and sexual in nature, for example in one poem he threatens:

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<sup>41</sup> Priapus only appears in the novel in a dream; the rest of the time he acts through human agents, in fact, even in the dream Priapus encourages a human to take action. Because he is so distant a figure some scholars have questioned whether he is the primary deity of the novel, for example Schnur 1972, Rankin 1971 and Baldwin 1973.

<sup>42</sup> *Priap.* 1 and *Priap.* 24.

In your back way I'll go if once you thief;  
If twice, me in your mouth you will receive;  
And if a third such theft you should attempt,  
Both penalties you'll have to undergo;  
In arse and mouth my potent force you'll know.<sup>43</sup>

As we will see in Chapter One, in the late republic and early empire, gardens were part of a contentious discourse around a tradition of natural simplicity and self-sufficiency, pitted against condemnation of urbanity and luxury. The presence in the garden associates Priapus with tradition, rural life and fertility, but is potentially complex. Uden has argued that the poems of the *Carmina Priapea* satirise such tensions by bringing Priapus from the pastoral/rural world into urban gardens that represent lust and indulgence rather than fertility and humility.<sup>44</sup> In Chapter Three, we will further explore the ways in which luxury and sophistication were associated with an urban context and often compared unfavourably to the rustic idylls which provide the focus of Chapter One. Representations of Priapus are used to reinforce, mock and critique that rustic idyll, which demonstrates the adaptability and ambiguity of his image.

Although gardens may be associated with sexual license, in the literature of the first century CE Priapus is characterised as unable to participate because of impotence or comic interruptions, as we see repeatedly in Ovid's *Fasti* where two rape attempts are foiled by a noisy donkey.<sup>45</sup> This impotence, which Holzberg suggests increases throughout the series of poems that make up the *Carmina Priapea*, sets Priapus up as a laughable figure and contrasts with his aggressive, threatening behaviour.<sup>46</sup> However, Frazel also argues that these rape attempts show the dominance of bodily needs over mental function; they are laughable because he is so driven by his need for masculine dominance.<sup>47</sup> Therefore, the large phallus of Priapus reflects both aggression and a lack of self-control which is evident in his attempted rapes and over-the-top threats. In our discussion of the visual material in Chapter Two, we will examine both the humorous potential of masculine aggression and the laughter at those who lacked it. Although the analysis of Frazel, Uden and others is focused on the literature, it can help to provide an insight into some of the ways in which people may have approached and interpreted images of Priapus, and we will return to literary analysis throughout this thesis to aid in our understanding of contemporary Roman contexts.

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<sup>43</sup> *Priap.* 35. Trans. Parker.

<sup>44</sup> Uden 2010.

<sup>45</sup> Frazel 2003; Fantham 1983.

<sup>46</sup> Holzberg 2005.

<sup>47</sup> Frazel 2003: 76.



## Why is this Thesis Important?

This thesis is a significant re-evaluation of imagery often dismissed as ‘obscene’ or ‘primitive’, it brings together a range of images of Priapus and, for the first time, explores their significance within cultural discourses prevalent in the Roman Empire. It will approach the images thematically to better understand the popularity of Priapus within domestic decoration and, more widely, the role of personal and domestic arts in cultural discourse and self-presentation. Although this thesis is based on a wide variety of images of Priapus it does not aim to be a comprehensive catalogue of images or image types. The work of Herter and the *LIMC* can provide a good overview of images for those interested in this. Instead this thesis approaches the material thematically using examples in different media and from different parts of the empire to explore the potential significance of Priapus’ image in social contexts.<sup>48</sup> Inevitably, this approach results in some significant examples not being included; however, by combining a detailed study of the image of Priapus with recent work on Roman cultural change, this will be the first thesis both to ground priapic imagery in its local and societal context and to consider its importance to those who commissioned and viewed it.

## Structure

Each chapter will take one theme associated with Priapus and use it as a tool to explore tensions within Roman culture and the discourse surrounding how to model oneself as an elite Roman at the turn of the millennium, and then use these tensions to inform our understanding of the role of Priapus in them. By using contemporary literature, architecture and art to provide a social context for the image of Priapus my intention is to highlight the ways in which some significant changes to Roman culture can be explored through detailed consideration of the image of just one character.

This thesis begins with an exploration of Priapus’ image in the role most commonly ascribed to him, that of rustic fertility god. Many images show Priapus in the form of a herm as an object of worship, however, despite the assertions of many writers, evidence that there was an organised cult or any cult practices is lacking. Therefore, rather than aim to ‘uncover’ lost cultic practice, we will instead take the more productive approach of considering how the visual representations of primitive rustic cult may have reflected contemporary ideals and concerns. The idea of an archaic cult of Priapus, which symbolised to the Romans a distant idealised past, has been so pervasive it has inspired many opinions in scholarship on Priapus and, in order to show how the early reception of Priapus still influences interpretations of the material today, this chapter will review the most significant works about priapic imagery from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Overall, this chapter will show

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<sup>48</sup> Herter 1932; Megow 2009.

that although images of Priapus could certainly have associations with ideas of fertility, virility and abundance, the rustic fertility god of the late republic and early empire was not a lasting remnant of an archaic cult but a contemporary ideological and intellectual creation, typical of the ambiguous area between Roman traditions and Hellenism, and rural and urban ways of life.

The second chapter will focus on Priapus as an apotropaic image in Roman art. It will investigate how the exaggerated, phallic image of Priapus fits into a context of Roman superstition and magic, particularly belief in the power of grotesque figures and the phallus to provide protection from the evil eye. By examining the contexts for many images of Priapus, we will see that it is likely that Priapus' image was considered particularly powerful as a protector and we will look at how this may have worked in practice in the liminal spaces with which he is associated. One way these images functioned was to induce laughter in the viewer. Often, exaggerated images were considered apotropaic as their ridiculous look inspired laughter which was thought to be a protective force. The very basic humour of a crude image was developed into an array of comic tropes that play upon the rusticity, phallicism and stationary nature of Priapus. Therefore, this chapter explores how the image of Priapus operated in high-brow, sophisticated and intelligent humour that masquerades as low-brow, base and inane. This chapter will also explore laughter at 'others' and how this was important to the construction of an elite, masculine identity that was in control of appearance and behaviour.

Building on the idea of sophisticated urban culture, the third chapter looks at the use of Priapus' image on luxury goods, such as silverware, and places these in the context of Roman tradition versus foreign luxury to understand how ambiguity and balance between competing customs were essential for elite Roman display. The chapter explores Roman discourses around luxury, and the implications for foreign imports and notions of morality. In particular, the focus is on dining areas and erotic encounters as areas of concern for moralists and examples of performative spaces for Hellenistic-inspired sophisticated culture. In a changing society, debates about tradition and innovation were heated and this chapter will question why images that seem tied to Rome's rustic past are popular in luxury domestic space. The chapter shows that the ambiguity of Priapus made him an ideal fit for luxurious, but liminal, domestic spaces that were full of tensions and contradictions, and that his associations with lust, hedonism and mythological fantasy worlds contributed to his popularity.

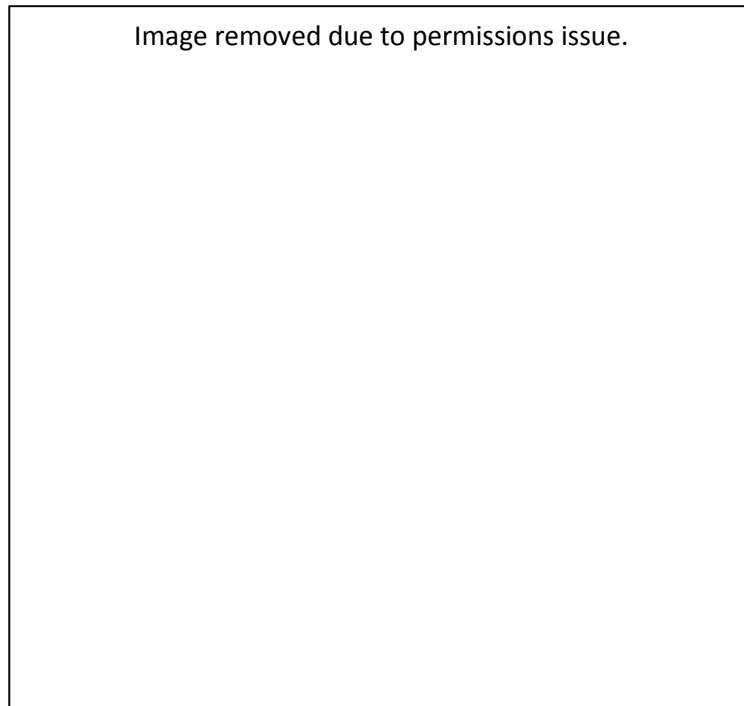
The final chapter looks at Priapus in the context of landscape imagery and focuses on the importance of landscape as a place of tradition, performance and culture. This chapter will bring together the ideas explored throughout the thesis by looking at the image of Priapus in real and imagined landscapes; representations of landscape can be used to discuss some of the key themes

for late republican and early imperial Roman culture. Particular emphasis will be placed on the image of Priapus as a way of exploring tensions between public and private space, urban and rustic ideals, and luxury and tradition. This will build upon the discussion of the concept of Roman rusticity from the first chapter whilst using examples from the other chapters to show that as a bordered space landscapes could be used to represent notions of fertility, luxury and humour as well as pushing boundaries and bringing external landscapes of performance into the home.

Although iconographic and functional themes will provide the structure of the thesis, the discussion will not solely be about the purpose of the objects but will consider the image of Priapus as a social construct within the context of Roman self-identity and changing cultural definitions. This allows us to look at why Priapus' image became so popular at a time of social change and how it reflects the priorities of the elite males responsible for establishing contemporary fashions who commissioned and viewed it. Only contextualising the visual material enables us to see Priapus' image as deliberately manufactured to create a symbolic object from a mythical, other-worldly past with all the hall marks of rusticity and primitivism an intelligent male urbanite would expect.

## Chapter One: Fertility and Rusticity

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**Figure 2:** Bronze fulcrum of the Amiternum Couch. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.  
Rome, Capitoline Museum.  
Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 148.

In the Palazzo Conservatori in Rome is an elaborate and intricate example of a Roman *kline* from an early first century BCE chamber tomb in the Italian town of Amiternum (Figure 2). Like most known examples of decorated *klinai* it has a Bacchic theme to its decoration; the feet are decorated with palmettes and tendrils, floral motifs run along the body and the two fulcra (one from the head of the couch and one from the foot) both combine a maenad head with a garlanded mule and contain decorative scenes of the grape harvest. The harvest scenes contain a wealth of motifs typical in Bacchic decoration; vines and other plants sprawl into every corner of the space, grapes hang bountifully from the vines and the figures taking part in the harvest are active and full of life. In the centre of the two images of the grape harvest is a distinctive figure. He is fixed to a plinth and has rigid, carved, pillar-like legs yet the upper body is animated. The most prominent feature of this figure, however, is the large phallus he lifts his tunic to reveal. He is a statue of the god Priapus, easily identified by the herm-like legs and ithyphallus, surrounded by the many typical fertility motifs described above.

Given this typical context for representations of Priapus, and in combination with his obvious iconographical links to sexual behaviour, it is not difficult to envisage why many scholars over centuries have categorised him as a god of fertility. In fact, there is a tendency to view Priapus

exclusively as a fertility god and although images of him, like the ones on the fulcra, do show a strong fertility influence it is unfortunately also the case that much of the previous analysis of his role within Roman culture has been based upon inconclusive evidence of cult activity and a desire to view him as part of a world of simplicity and rusticity. Focusing on the visual representations of Priapus, like those on this *kline*, provides an insight into Roman culture that will allow us to look in greater depth at the ways in which Romans used his image in a visual language that interrogated urban male identity through notions of rusticity and the past.

This chapter will examine some key questions raised by images of Priapus that present him as a fertility deity through iconography and motifs such as those on the couch from Amiternum. As a brief survey of the most common types of Priapus will reveal, he was a figure strongly associated with fertility, both in physical appearance and sphere of influence, and it is likely that in many scenes he acted as a short hand for fecundity. It is from the perspective of fertility representations that we can begin to explore the significance of images of Priapus to Roman cultural discourse and the way this rhetoric has influenced scholarly interpretation of the images to the present day. It will become apparent that Priapus' connection to fertility made him the ideal figure for the Romans to use to engage with their self-identity by using the past and illusory landscapes to discuss the contemporary world.

There are several ways in which the image of Priapus is representative of the first century Roman discourse concerning the past and tradition, and many of them use his association with fertility to connect him to ideals of rusticity. The repeated location of images of Priapus, both in art and text, in rustic scenes evokes a world of pastoral idyll. This world is often explicitly placed beyond contemporary reality and is a world in which prosperity and happiness proliferate. The ideals presented through this world are inherently related to wider cultural dialogues prevalent as the Roman world was transformed from republic to empire and instability led to self-reflection. Often the landscapes in which we find Priapus define their world through mythical subjects, most frequently using Bacchic figures and motifs. Other scenes evoke a rural, agricultural 'golden age' as a timeless feature of the Roman world. Both types of landscape are concerned with representing worlds of peace and plenty where fertility comes from the piety of the people and the benevolence of the gods, while simple pleasures such as wine, a good harvest and love are to be valued above all else. In literature these ideas are frequently tied into a desire to escape the urban centres and live a peaceful life in this imagined countryside. The Amiternum Couch typifies these types of scene; on one side nude figures trample grapes while pan-pipes hang from vines, reminiscent of many images in which Bacchus himself presides over satyrs at the grape harvest. Yet the scene itself is a depiction

of a modest country harvest and could be either a mythical or a timeless rustic scene glorified over the politics and commercialism of urban life.

There can be no doubt that the Amiternum Couch was a luxury item. The wooden bed frame is supported by legs of copper alloy and it is inlaid with a variety of silver, copper and glass plate enamel as well as being intricately carved. Wallace-Hadrill has argued that *klinai* were the height of luxury for Romans and often used in elite funerary settings, as appears to be the case with this couch.<sup>49</sup> The decorative scene of a simple rustic harvest is, therefore, in stark contrast with the sophisticated life and urban experience of the owners of furniture like this, who are unlikely to have taken part in a harvest. As we so often encounter images of Priapus in such apparently contradictory situations, these images allow us to explore the tensions between urban and rustic at that time. The luxurious decoration of this Greek-style couch draws us into the debates about foreign influences upon Roman culture. The opulent materials contrast starkly with the more 'Roman' scene of rural endeavour and piety so often represented in these other-worldly landscapes.

The fact that these scenes of rural idyll clearly represent a world beyond contemporary reality problematises the way in which most scholars approach images of Priapus; as depictions of actual cult practice and evidence that at this time Romans were actively worshipping Priapus idols. It will, therefore, be necessary in this chapter not only to examine the significance of images of Priapus and the scholarship, both Roman and modern, but also to explore the possibility that representations of cult are in fact an iconographic convention rather than reflections of reality. Scholars studying Priapus have traditionally been concerned only with religious worship and have tried to make the image of Priapus fit with their conceptions of ancient cult practice and, furthermore, have tried to use the images as evidence of a long history for priapic cult. This scholarship takes the Roman construction of a timeless world at face value and attempts to find a prehistoric period in which the simple rustic representations may have been accurate depictions of real life. These ideas still saturate work on Priapus today so we will need to look at the ways in which Priapus has previously been defined in order better to understand perceptions of Priapus and to avoid taking a similar cult-focused approach that neglects the nuances of the Roman creation of Priapus as an image rather than a deity. We will see that it is not possible to determine whether Romans were actively worshipping Priapus but this does not detract from his significance as a cultural construct in art and literature. In fact, the scenes depicting cult practices play a central part in the creation of the image

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<sup>49</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 429. See Chapter Three for a discussion of the image of Priapus in funerary contexts.

of Priapus as an emblem of rustic fertility and piety, essentially an emblem of what many saw as traditional Roman cultural ideals.

### **Fertility in the Image of Priapus**

A typical way of comprehending Priapus' association with fertility has been to catalogue his image or categorise it into types. Many of the images that fall within these types clearly associate Priapus with fertility and make explicit his power in this sphere. I will briefly survey the most significant types here with the intention of showing that the purpose in depicting Priapus was often to represent the concept of fertility. We shall see through later chapters there were also much more complex issues explored through the familiarity and replication of his image but he is depicted as a fertility god in most contexts and the underlying fertility theme remains very important for understanding Priapus' place within Roman art. It is, in fact, essential for understanding the layers of complex meaning found in some of the images discussed in later chapters. The fertility connotations of his image associate Priapus with a world of Bacchic abundance, a past 'golden age' and human, specifically male, virility; we will explore all of these concepts in this chapter.

Herter's *De Priapo* (1932) remains the seminal reference work for catalogued images of Priapus and textual sources. Others have also tried to understand the iconography of Priapus by collecting images together into catalogues, including Reinach as early as 1897.<sup>50</sup> This interest in cataloguing can be seen as part of a wider impulse to understand antiquities by trying to find similarities between them and many studies of this type aim to identify an original from which other images have derived.<sup>51</sup> Herter too was fascinated by origins, and dedicated a chapter of his work to understanding ancient cults of Priapus and another to his eastern origins. Although this approach to art has been somewhat discredited we will see that the quest to understand Priapus by searching for his origins has played a large part in the way he has been studied over centuries.<sup>52</sup>

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<sup>50</sup> Reinach 1897.

<sup>51</sup> This process is known as *kopienkritik* and is the basis of many twentieth century works devoted to Roman art but most notably it is the basis of Furtwängler's *Meisterwerke der griechischen Plastik* published in 1893 which was highly influential.

<sup>52</sup> For example, Stewart 2011: 234 says 'There is barely any sound evidence to support the traditional picture of Roman copying as the reproduction of famous Greek sculptures for its own sake.'



**Figure 3:** A painted Priapus from House II.9.1 at Pompeii.  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com)  
 [accessed 18/04/17].

## Abundant Fruits

The *anasyrma* pose is one of the most common and recognisable forms of images of Priapus. In this pose he is dressed but exposes his phallus by drawing up his tunic to carry an array of fruits, like the depictions on the Amiternum Couch.<sup>53</sup> Images of this type are found in a variety of forms and locations across the empire, suggesting it was recognisable and relevant to a range of people. This form is thought to have derived from full body herms, and the earliest seem to date from the third century BCE but they then continue throughout the Roman period.<sup>54</sup> Often this pose is found in statues and relief but a painting from Pompeii provides a good example of the image in situ and can help us to explore its relevance (Figure 3). The painting is a fresco from House II.9.1, which adorns the pillar of what is thought to be the summer *triclinium* and overlooks a garden space. In it a dressed Priapus lifts his tunic to reveal a large phallus and within his tunic is a variety of fruits. Even though this appears to be a relatively life-like rendering of Priapus his feet are still attached to a base in the picture implying he is supposed to represent a statue. The positioning of this fresco is interesting as the fertility theme can be seen in two ways; firstly it is common to find fertility and prosperity related figures in dining settings, Bacchus and Venus for example are very common.<sup>55</sup> In this case, Priapus with his bundle of fruit seems an appropriate way of acknowledging the fertility that has allowed the diners to eat. In addition, scenes with an erotic nature also feature prominently

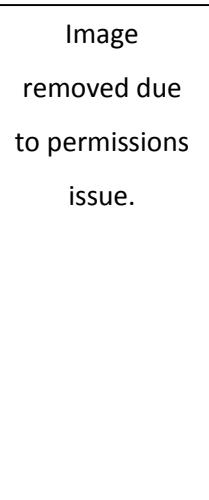
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<sup>53</sup> This type of image is also linked to many others in which Priapus lifts his tunic to reveal his ithyphallus but does not carry fruit. Fertility is probably also a connotation of such images but expressed in the form of human virility alone.

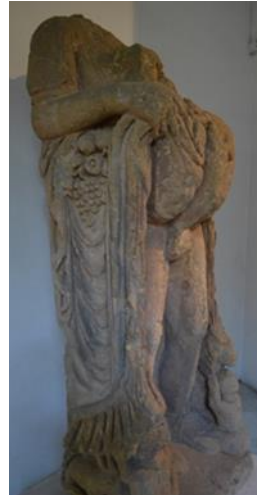
<sup>54</sup> Megow 2009: 1042.

<sup>55</sup> Kaufmann-Heinimann 2011: 193. See Hales 2008 for a discussion of Bacchus and Venus in domestic settings.

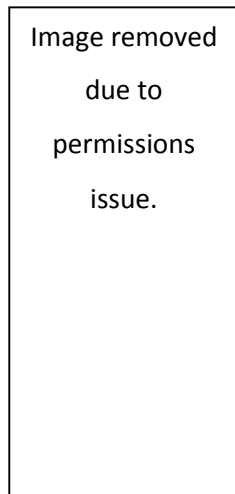




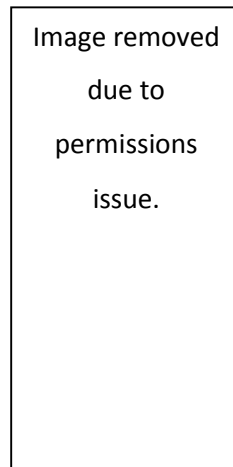
**Figure 4:** Bronze statuette of Priapus holding children. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.  
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1035.



**Figure 5:** Marble statue of Priapus. 2nd century CE. Barcelona, Museum of Archaeology.  
Photo: Euan Martin.



**Figure 6:** Bronze Priapus statuette in the *anasmyna* pose. Private collection.  
Photo:  
<http://www.bonhams.com/auctions/20164/lot/78/> [accessed 28/11/14].



**Figure 7:** Stone Priapus figures. Cologne, Roman-Germanic Museum.  
Photo: Borger and Schmidt-Glassner 1977: 186.

in dining rooms and so the large phallus seen here may fit into that context, perhaps providing a talking point for guests. It is also notable that this Priapus overlooks the garden as well as the *triclinium*; this was an area with obvious associations with plant fertility and a domain of Priapus in both art and literature.

In an alternative form of the *anasyrma* pose Priapus holds children instead of fruit in his tunic, although the rest of the pose is usually replicated (Figure 4). There is no simple explanation for these scenes but it seems likely that human fertility is being emphasised over the agricultural. They may also relate to images in which we see Priapus with erotes or *silanoi* with children, usually thought to be a young Bacchus.<sup>56</sup> In Barcelona, an unusually large Priapus statue combines these various motifs of fertility by revealing his phallus and holding fruit in an *anasyrma* pose while children climb around his feet (Figure 5).

Undoubtedly the power of *anasyrma* images lies in the dual representation of the phallus, the iconic emblem of Priapus' fertilising power, and the fruit he bears, creating a cornucopia within his tunic. These representations are found on a vast array of media, statues, which themselves vary widely from small bronze or terracotta examples through to large marble garden ornaments, and also keys, altars, coins and paintings. They also seem to have had a strong appeal outside of Italy; a small copper example, just over eight centimetres tall, found in Essex in 2010 shows this type of Priapus was used for small portable objects (Figure 6); more striking are the garden ornaments in Cologne that show the same motifs of exposed phallus and fruit bearing but also show much more localised styles in the rendering (Figure 7).<sup>57</sup> It would seem that this figure was so recognisable as a representation of fertility the image could be replicated on almost anything and almost anywhere.

As well as carrying fruit in his tunic, Priapus is sometimes depicted carrying fruit in a cornucopia. This is very similar in symbolism to the *anasyrma* pose with the plenitude of fruit clearly representing fertility and abundance. Many other deities are represented with a cornucopia and it is by no means a uniquely or specifically priapic attribute but it may provide an even greater significance in the arms of Priapus as the shape of the horn could be seen to be phallic.<sup>58</sup> As a well-established symbol, the cornucopia provides a convenient short hand for prosperity. A limestone panel found in a garden at Aquileia shows Priapus both holding fruit in his tunic and carrying a cornucopia (Figure 8). This image is part of a general tendency towards representing deities concerned with agricultural and domestic

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<sup>56</sup> Zanker 1988; Castriota 1995: 76 also recognises the potential of erotes to be Bacchic figures.

<sup>57</sup> Borger and Schmidt-Glassner 1977: 62.

<sup>58</sup> Johns 1982: 40.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 8:** Limestone Priapus  
panel. Aquileia, Archaeology  
Museum.

Photo: <http://www.ubi-erat-lupa.org/monument.php?id=13978>  
[accessed 05/12/16].

success with cornucopia particularly in the Augustan period when cornucopia are featured with Lares, personifications of Roma and even the Genius of Augustus amongst others.

### The Phallus

The phallic nature of any image of Priapus could associate him with fertility through the clear implication of human virility, and the contexts in which many basic Priapus herms are depicted support this. One of the most remarkable ways in which Priapus is repeatedly represented is as sprinkling his own phallus. A first century CE bronze statuette found in Herculaneum and now in the archaeological museum at Naples is a particularly well preserved example (Figure 9). The Priapus is bearded, dressed and wearing a cap. The phallus is so prominent it has lifted the garment and is exposed with the garment draped over it. Priapus' legs are in a herm-like form and the tilt backwards and hand on hip resemble the *lordosis* pose (Figure 10).<sup>59</sup> In his left hand Priapus holds a small jar and is pouring or sprinkling something from it onto his phallus. Grant has suggested that he may in fact be pouring a libation in honour of the fertility powers of his own phallus.<sup>60</sup> This idea has some merit, as a further example will illustrate. An intricately decorated silver goblet from the Cleveland Museum of Art, known as the Vicarello Goblet, shows a semi-nude maenad attending a similar herm, which depicts Priapus pouring onto his phallus (Figure 54).<sup>61</sup> This appears to suggest that the phallus of Priapus is the specific focus of the scene. He holds a *thyrsus* and panther skin. The cup also depicts

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<sup>59</sup> In this form, the nude Priapus thrusts his hips forward to make his phallus even more prominent. Often the hands are placed on the hips for further emphasis but they sometimes hold objects. This is usually the pose in which Priapus is represented when depicted as a herm.

<sup>60</sup> Grant 1975: 125-9.

<sup>61</sup> Megow 2009: 1033.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 9:** Bronze statuette of Priapus sprinkling his phallus from Herculaneum. 1st century CE. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Varone 2000: 23.



**Figure 10:** Copper statuette of Priapus in *lordosis* pose. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=828008&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=828008&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1) [accessed 12/05/16].

a dancing satyr and an altar with offerings in jars and cups, further drawing attention to the sacral nature of the representation. It is unclear what Priapus is imagined to be pouring onto his phallus but many early scholars conflated this image with actual cult practice and suggested that libations would have been poured onto the phallus in reality.<sup>62</sup> Payne Knight suggested water would be poured onto the phallus as water is the source of all life, presumably it would therefore encourage the fertility of the phallus.<sup>63</sup> Famin, on the other hand, thought it was an aphrodisiac solution and discusses possible ingredients and applications at length before condemning the use of them, indicating that he considered such images to reflect actual cult practices.<sup>64</sup> I suspect the Bacchic context and assemblage of associated vessels are intended to suggest wine is involved in this fantasy scene; the panther skin and *thyrsus* clearly associate Priapus with Bacchus himself. The maenad and satyr, panther skin and wine-related paraphernalia situate this image within the Bacchic world.

The fertility Priapus represents was, of course, aggressively masculine in nature; virility was an important masculine attribute symbolised by the phallus which was the *locus* of male power and Priapus' image is a visual manifestation of this. Therefore, one function of the prominent display of Priapus' phallus is its association with masculinity and the power that entailed; for example in Figure 10 we see Priapus with no adornments or attributes other than a prominent phallus. Images such as this do not necessarily represent the Priapus of the garden that we find in poetic constructs where he is the butt of jokes about impotence but seem to relate to prose literature that idealises the agricultural simplicity of the past where he is a powerful deity; in cases such as these the objects may tell a story that does not wholly correspond to the dominant narratives in the *Priapea*.

Besides the obvious visual association of Priapus' phallus with masculinity because of the exaggeration of the male physique and the exemplification of the Roman concept of the male body as hard and dry (an issue we will return to in Chapter Three), other evidence from ancient visual culture demonstrates that the phallus was firmly associated with the most masculine forms of male behaviour. Like Priapus himself, the motif of the phallus as a symbol of aggressive masculinity can be found in the visual arts of Greece. Attic vases of the sixth and fifth centuries BCE, for example the Bomford Cup, often depict the phallus and belong to a context of male dominance and particularly

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<sup>62</sup> Although the Priapus in this image is depicted as a herm with a fixed plinth his upper body appears animated as if it has been 'brought to life' by the maenad, the Priapus on the Amiternum Couch is shown in a similar state. This is discussed in more detail in Chapter Three.

<sup>63</sup> Payne Knight 1865: 37.

<sup>64</sup> Famin 1871: 32-34.

sexual dominance over *hetairai* and slaves.<sup>65</sup> The Eurymedon Vase further associates this masculinity with military and cultural supremacy in its depiction of Greek phallic aggression towards the Persians.<sup>66</sup> This visual depiction of masculine authority was adopted by Roman men as a symbol of their own virility, shown, for example, by cavalry bridles, where the phallus was used in the decoration of military equipment designed to be taken into battle and to display Roman supremacy, based on masculine violence, across the empire.<sup>67</sup> The association with soldiers is further emphasised by the Priapus-shaped amulets and statuettes found at Roman military sites, such as a small bronze Priapus in the *anasyrma* pose found at Carzield in the UK.<sup>68</sup> Richard Alston has shown that, despite their portrayal in literature as ‘thugs’, soldiers were in fact *exempla* of masculinity through the power that their violence endows upon them.<sup>69</sup> Similarly, Priapus has a violent nature which is made manifest in the ability of the phallus to become a weapon, and to hold sexual power over others. The phallic image of Priapus represents a very base kind of masculinity that, in stark contrast to the urban sophistication of elite culture, displays violence, sexual dominance and, thus, power in a direct and confrontational way.

The clarity with which the types discussed here draw a link between Priapus and both human and plant fertility is striking and unequivocally shows that in the Roman mind he was a representation of fertility and associated ideas, such as prosperity and abundance. This brief survey of the most common attributes of Priapus in visual imagery and some of the meanings behind these compositional choices allows us now to look at how others have approached this material and what the contexts of the images can add to our understanding of our own preconceptions of Priapus.

### **Payne Knight, Frazer and ‘Primitive’ Fertility Cults**

Herter departed from much early scholarship on Priapus, which was speculative about meanings and origins, in order to catalogue a wide variety of sources relating to Priapus under different themed headings. Nevertheless, he did also attempt some explanation of the worship of Priapus and in this respect was dependent on that early approach. He looked to establish the origins for the cult, locating it in a combination of ancient tree and ass worship and attributing the worship of phallicism

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<sup>65</sup> Osborne 1998: 133-35.

<sup>66</sup> Davidson 1997: 170 highlights the connection between the suggested penetration on the Eurymedon vase and manly power. See Cohen 2011 469-77 for a fuller account of the possible interpretations and discussion of the sexual aggression and violence in the image.

<sup>67</sup> See Kemkes and Scheuerbrandt 1997: 42-43 for examples.

<sup>68</sup> This is now in the Dumfries Museum, see Hutchinson 1983: 36 for further details. The site appears to have been a second century CE cavalry fort.

<sup>69</sup> Alston 1998: 219-221.

in rustic peoples to a naiveté, which was lost under the Romans.<sup>70</sup> This stance particularly reflects the late nineteenth century approach of Sir James George Frazer and offers some insight into the ongoing influence of earlier studies of Priapus.

Studies of Priapus have been conducted for centuries as part of a wider discussion about fertility, cult and sex that has captured the imaginations of scholars and the public alike. Much of this scholarship is heavily focused on finding prehistoric origins for Priapus and often depictions of him in cult situations are used as evidence of a real fertility cult. As we have seen, images of Priapus often suggest rusticity and simplicity and so they lend themselves easily to the search for the origins of Roman religion, as scholars use them in their attempts to find a window into a prehistoric world. Although scholars have looked at fertility as a central theme in Roman religion for centuries they have often let it become too entangled in ideas of 'primitivism', 'eroticism' and 'decline.'

In the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, an array of significant works that explain and catalogue recent discoveries were published by those who visited the Bay of Naples. The discoveries at sites such as Pompeii and Herculaneum had surprised many as the large volume of erotic material, including many images and statues of Priapus, came to light.<sup>71</sup> Although erotic literature from the ancient world was known, the explicit images found on the Bay of Naples were far removed from the neo-classical ideals popular at the time.<sup>72</sup> Images of Priapus, however, very quickly became common in contemporary culture as they were so accessible to those travelling to Italy. There were a variety of reactions to this material but it quickly became part of a wide discourse on sexuality and morality that still colours reactions to it today. Although most of the works discussed here date from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, modern scholarship is still heavily influenced by their conclusions and portrayals of the cult of Priapus. By looking at their assumptions in some depth I hope to show where our current preconceptions about Priapus and his place in Roman culture originate, and to demonstrate they are often misleading as they fail to consider the self-awareness shown by the Romans in their humour and sophisticated use of visual language to construct an idealised, traditional rural world.

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<sup>70</sup> Herter 1932.

<sup>71</sup> Harris 2007: 113; Mattusch 2013.

<sup>72</sup> Harris 2007: 113-114.

## A Brief History of Priapus in Scholarship

Probably the most influential work to tackle images of Priapus was written by Richard Payne Knight and published in 1786. His work was inspired by a letter from fellow Dilettante, William Hamilton, describing a religious festival dedicated to St Cosmo in the countryside near Naples that still used phallic representations.<sup>73</sup> *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus and its Connection with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients* set out to explain the Roman statues of Priapus from around Naples, which many considered obscene, and show that they were part of a broader tendency towards worshipping human fertility across the world originating in prehistoric times. Payne Knight firmly established Priapus as a god of fertility, linking his figure to a universal impulse to worship the 'generative principle.' He stated that in creating religious imagery people sometimes added an 'organ of generation of enormous magnitude to signify the application of this power to its noblest end, the procreation of sensitive and rational beings. This composition forms the common Priapus of the Roman poets.'<sup>74</sup> Although he perceived priapic figures to be symbols of procreation, Payne Knight did not believe that either the Romans or the women worshipping St Cosmo in eighteenth century Isernia fully understood this.<sup>75</sup> The ancients (of prehistory), who he credits with originally worshipping a form of Priapus, did not have 'shame' as they were only following 'basic instincts' common to all men. On the other hand, the Romans were 'heathens' who did not understand the significance of the phallus as they had lost the original meaning.<sup>76</sup> This desire to find a morally uncorrupt form of priapic worship in a more ancient time is a common theme through much discussion of images of Priapus to the present day.

Payne Knight is integral to both the study of how Priapus' image has been interpreted over time and also the reactions to such work. As an important figure in British society in the late eighteenth century Payne Knight epitomises the culture that first began to embed Priapus in explorations of primitivism and morality. London's elite society in the eighteenth century was dominated by men's clubs that actively engaged with the erotic and the latest scientific theory, usually combining the two within an educational discourse.<sup>77</sup> As an active member of this society it should not come as a

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<sup>73</sup> This letter is printed at the beginning of Payne Knight's work; Knight 1996 discusses the travels of Hamilton and his finds.

<sup>74</sup> Payne Knight 1865: 42.

<sup>75</sup> Payne Knight 1865: 119.

<sup>76</sup> Payne Knight 1865.

<sup>77</sup> Harvey 2004: 61-68.



Image removed due to permissions issue.

**Figure 11:** An image plate from *A Discourse on the Worship of Priapus and its Connection with the Mystic Theology of the Ancients* showing Priapus statuettes and gems.  
Photo: Payne Knight 1865: Plate V.

surprise that Payne Knight published an analysis of the phallic art being found in the excavated Roman sites.<sup>78</sup> Yet his *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* was rejected by some contemporaries as immoral and it was ultimately detrimental to his social standing in many circles to the extent that eventually he tried to acquire and destroy all copies of the work.<sup>79</sup> This kind of stigma has played a large part in the history of scholarship on Priapus but it did not prevent contemporaries of Payne Knight developing different approaches to the material with the aim of creating a more acceptable façade.

In the eighteenth century there was a particularly strong interest in the past and specifically in tracing it back as far as possible.<sup>80</sup> Several of Payne Knight's generation were engaged in projects motivated by a passion for tracing ancient origins, for example, D'Hancarville and Hamilton had already begun publishing collections of vases in 1766 with the aim of illustrating the developments of ancient art.<sup>81</sup> D'Hancarville in particular was an enthusiast of 'discovering' the most ancient religions as he tried to identify universal origins for religious practice.<sup>82</sup> In 1771, D'Hancarville also published a collection of gems featuring Priapus and Venus, here images of cult activity are

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<sup>78</sup> Rousseau 1987: 106.

<sup>79</sup> Messmann 1974: 44.

<sup>80</sup> See Smiles (1991) for discussions of the British interest in the ancient past.

<sup>81</sup> Jenkins 1996: 40-64. Provides a good introduction to the relationship between Hamilton and D'Hancarville and an overview of their publications. See also Knight 1996 in the same volume for a more detailed biography of Hamilton and an investigation of his motivations as collector and publisher.

<sup>82</sup> Jenkins 1996.

Image removed due to permissions issue.

**Figure 12:** Drawing from Famin showing the sacrifice of a virgin to Priapus.

Photo: Famin 1816: Plate VIII.

combined with sexually explicit illustrations.<sup>83</sup> Although these works were less concerned with Priapus individually he often played a significant part in their studies because he could be used in contemporary taste for combining the past with a taste for the erotic.

One of the most infamous works to look at fertility cults in Roman art and attempt to explain their antiquity also fully embraced depicting the erotic details; César Famin's *Musée Royal de Naples; peintures, bronzes et statues érotiques du cabinet secret, avec leur explication* (1816) included a collection of sixty lithographs of erotic art, including images of Priapus, that had been found at Pompeii. It was considered so obscene at the time of publication that most copies were destroyed by the French authorities, but an English edition was released some fifty five years later.<sup>84</sup>

Interestingly, this later edition was released as erotic works were becoming increasingly condemned in British society, which suggests that despite increasing regulation of erotic images through the nineteenth century they still appealed to, at least some of, the public.<sup>85</sup> His approach to images of Priapus is significantly different from that of Payne Knight. He depicts a relief supposedly found at Pompeii and describes it as follows:

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<sup>83</sup> D'Hancarville 1771; Hamilton and D'Hancarville 1776.

<sup>84</sup> The English edition was published in 1871 as *The Royal Museum at Naples: Being some account of the erotic paintings, bronzes and statues contained in that famous 'Cabinet Secret*. The author was given as Colonel Fanin.

<sup>85</sup> Pease 2000: 39-50 suggests that increasing literacy was instrumental in the spread of erotic works in the nineteenth century.

In this bas-relief is represented one of the most disgraceful ceremonies of Paganism. Several women are conducting a young girl, whom we may suppose to be newly married, to a Statue of Priapus, and the unfortunate creature is already on the point of making to the marble figure the painful sacrifice of her virginity. She alone, of all the troop, is entirely naked; she bends her head with a confused and sad air, and leans on the shoulder of an aged woman, possibly her mother. Not far off a little girl plays on the double flute to stifle the cries of pain extorted from the victim; farther off an old woman, resting on one knee, looks upon the scene, and appears to grow impatient at the hesitation manifested by the young wife.<sup>86</sup>

This description is evidently composed to draw upon anti-pagan sentiment whilst simultaneously graphically describing an erotic scene (Figure 12).<sup>87</sup> Famin appears to denounce ancient morality while titillating his readers with descriptions of sexual fertility cults. Although the rhetoric suggests disgust at pagan practices the book itself and its illustrations are clearly erotic in intent. This creates clever, if crude, joke at the expense of moralists and those who pander to them with apologies in their work.

One such apologist, writing early in the nineteenth century, went to considerable effort to emphasise the cultural rather than sexual importance of his writing. Dulaure, who published *Gods of Generation* in France in 1805, was clearly inspired by Payne Knight.<sup>88</sup> He opens with an apologetic tone; 'I shall describe institutions, practices and deities which are indecent to our morals; but I shall describe them decently.'<sup>89</sup> Throughout his writing he is keen to distance himself from the eroticism of his subject matter through searching for origins which, in the discourse established by Payne Knight and others, can only be 'pure' in nature. In his significant study he focuses on what he termed 'The Gods of Generation' which were Priapus and the more 'primitive' gods from whom he believed Priapus to have evolved. Throughout his writing he is clear that finding the 'origins' of priapic

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<sup>86</sup> Famin 1816: 20-21.

<sup>87</sup> It is possible this relief did not exist and that the description and drawing that accompanies it were based on a report in Augustine's *City of God* VII.24 that brides were forced to sit on 'the rod of Priapus'. See Lhomme 2009 for a discussion of this in Christian literature.

<sup>88</sup> Rousseau 1987: 136.

<sup>89</sup> Dulaure 1934: 32.

worship is his aim. Dulaure discusses both the phallus and Priapus and is very clear that to the ancients they were symbols of 'fecundity'. In fact, he defines Priapus as essentially a herm with animal genitals attached, suggesting that the genitals are not supposed to represent those of an anthropomorphic deity but those of a goat or bull; in his view the original fertility symbols of the most ancient peoples.<sup>90</sup>

In his attempts to demonstrate the simple origins of priapic worship we see many of the tropes that permeate other writing about Priapus brought together in Dulaure's descriptions. He is clearly characterised as rustic, and Columella, who wrote about agriculture in the first century CE, is quoted to support the fact that often his image was 'only a tree trunk' and he is worshipped with 'orgies' and 'honey and milk.'<sup>91</sup> We are also told of various 'indecent' rites performed in his honour. Petronius is cited as evidence for temples of Priapus served by priestesses in nocturnal mysteries and the relief from Famin discussed above (Figure 12) is used to explain a practice of Roman brides sacrificing their virginity to Priapus.<sup>92</sup> All of these attributes are repeated time and time again in descriptions of Priapus in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and, as we shall see, Roman authors are not always reliable sources.

In 1865 Payne Knight's work was republished and included an essay centred on phallic deities by Thomas Wright.<sup>93</sup> The focus of the essay is the Middle Ages; however, much of the narrative is based upon the ancient worship of Priapus which is then used as a comparison with later practices. In fact, Wright's work is largely a reworking of Dulaure's (which had not been translated into English at this time) but it provides some insight into the development of the themes of studies of Priapus, showing a much stronger tendency towards moralising than Dulaure or Payne Knight with condemnation clear in the language used, as he speaks of 'obscene subjects', 'vices contrary to nature' and 'unbounded licence and depravity.'<sup>94</sup> This suggests that rather than becoming more accepting of priapic subjects, commentators were actually becoming even more hostile and this hostility has influenced the way in which Priapus and other erotic Roman art has been viewed since. This hostility reflects the changes that took place in society through the nineteenth century. A shift in moral codes led to a transformation in what was considered publicly acceptable and sexual subjects, particularly

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<sup>90</sup> Dulaure 1934: 43-51.

<sup>91</sup> Dulaure 1934: 117.

<sup>92</sup> Dulaure 1805: 113.

<sup>93</sup> Wright 1865 *On the Worship of the Generative Powers during the Middle Ages of Western Europe* was published as an essay added to publications of Payne Knight's *Discourse on the Worship of Priapus*.

<sup>94</sup> Wright 1865.

anything phallic, were deemed corrupting and hidden from public view.<sup>95</sup> This does not mean that people did not continue to access sexual material both legitimately and on black markets but it suggests that the perception of erotic works had changed somewhat and become more limited.<sup>96</sup> Simultaneously there was a strong sentiment of Christian triumph over paganism which is shown in much contemporary literature and can be seen in the contemporary celebration of the British Empire conquering 'heathen' overseas territories.<sup>97</sup>

Within a century the comparative approaches used by D'Hancarville and Payne Knight to investigate the origins of religion had been developed into James George Frazer's *The Golden Bough*. This highly influential work, first published in 1890, asserts universality within fertility rites and religion and sets about demonstrating this by comparing 'primitive' religions, including those of ancient Italy, from across the world. In contrast to the works we have discussed, which often follow rhetoric about the decline in morals under the Romans and therefore a decline in the sanctity of their religious practices, at the core of Frazer's work is the idea that cultures evolve. From a religious perspective, Frazer states, this evolution is from magic through deist religions to science.<sup>98</sup> Frazer himself described the approach most succinctly when he said 'I have really been discussing questions of more general interest which concern the gradual evolution of human thought from savagery to civilization.'<sup>99</sup>

The concept of 'primitivism' is strongly associated with the ideas of the late nineteenth century and the work of Frazer. Since it has negative connotations of imperialism, I will try to limit its use to describing the interpretations reached in that context. On a basic level it can be defined as indicating something from an early, unsophisticated time. However, in the context of Frazer's work it is also tied to notions of tribalism and savagery. The 'primitive' in Frazer can describe both the prehistoric

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<sup>95</sup> 1857 saw the creation of the Obscene Publications Act which specifically focused on suppressing work which may corrupt those with weak minds. See Wallace 2007 for further discussion of the implications of this on sexual imagery. Orrells 2013: 14 suggests that in reaction to the increased focus on morality nineteenth century erotic works were often anonymously and privately printed.

<sup>96</sup> The situation was no doubt complex but legislation shows there was a change in approach from the state even if people continued to access material, see Hall 2015 and Pease 2000 for detailed discussion of the complexities in Victorian approaches to sexual material.

<sup>97</sup> For example Bulwer Lytton 1834 *The Last Days of Pompeii* is about the destruction of Pompeii but the plot sets the converts to Christianity against an unscrupulous pagan priest and eventually the 'good' escape but decadent heathens are destroyed by the volcano. See St Clair and Bautz 2012 for a discussion of the popularity and influence of the book and Behlman 2007 for an exploration of the appeal of one character as emblematic of the self-control in the face of pagan chaos valued by Victorian readers.

<sup>98</sup> Frazer 1906-15.

<sup>99</sup> Frazer 1906-15.

past and refer to contemporary peoples considered to be less evolved than the Europeans, and so to avoid confusion I will reserve the use of the term for Frazerian contexts.

Perhaps the most interesting thing to note in Frazer for the study of Priapus is that he does not directly discuss worship of Priapus although there are many points at which it would seem an obvious inclusion in his narrative. Although much of Frazer's work is devoted to ideas of fertility there is little specific discussion of phallic rites or gods. The infrequent descriptions of fertility worship, although brief and oblique, emphasise the negative ideas of lust and promiscuity we have seen established in earlier writing. As we may expect from an evolutionist, Frazer sees continuity from the ancient to the Christian practices of less civilised areas. He describes, for example, a Christian religious festival in which a 'male organ of generation' is carried in an 'obscene pantomime.'<sup>100</sup> He further comments that many festivals in Italy have not changed in their nature over time.<sup>101</sup>

The introduction of the ideas of primitive fertility cults and all the rhetoric concerning their 'debauchery' to a wider general public is probably the most significant contribution of Frazer to the study of Priapus. Although few know of Priapus and the specifics of his place within Roman culture, most people in western society would be familiar with the archetype of the Roman fertility ritual with the phallic ornament and orgies it was imagined this would entail. Similarly, the tendency of modern scholars to discuss Roman religion in depth without referring to Priapus seems to reflect the practice of Frazer who possibly considered such an image of a god too obvious in its nature to be concealed with polite terminology and discreet references. Ackerman has said: 'the leading ideas in *The Golden Bough* have been so widely diffused through academic, literary and journalistic channels that they are known to many educated people today who have never read the work or any of its abridgements and are unable consciously to connect the idea with Frazer.'<sup>102</sup> I would suggest that, when it comes to Priapus, this is true of the influence of Payne Knight especially but also the other writers of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries whose influence we have started to explore. The ways in which each writer interpreted Priapus were in turn heavily influenced by their own cultural context.

Although these accounts were written and published over one hundred years ago, the themes and approaches have held much influence over scholarship regarding fertility and, specifically, Priapus to

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<sup>100</sup> Frazer 1906-15: 402-404.

<sup>101</sup> Frazer 1906-15: 635.

<sup>102</sup> Ackermann 1987: 99.

the present day. These early works that deal with Priapus set the precedent for considering him as a rustic deity developed from the earliest forms of religion, and associate him with eroticism primarily through fertility cults believed to be based around orgiastic rites and the sacrifice of virginity. In these respects he represents both the respect for antiquity and the abhorrence of pagan religion that dominate much of the scholarship from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.

### ‘Others’ and Origins

In many of the eighteenth and nineteenth century reactions to priapic imagery, the clear interest in discerning the origins of religion and attempting to account for practices in pre-documented eras is bound up with more contemporary concerns about northern European status and interaction with ‘others’. Images of Priapus were particularly susceptible to this kind of interrogation, firstly because they were Roman and so could easily be incorporated into prevalent thoughts about contemporary Italy as a ‘backwards’ country, and secondly because some saw something primitive and universal in the phallic imagery.<sup>103</sup> There is a clear interest in discerning the origins of western civilisation and finding tangible remnants of that past in other societies. The subtext is that northern Europe is culturally developed and superior to the superstitious (i.e. uneducated) peoples of southern Europe and the rest of the world.

Religious practice, in particular, was an area in which many scholars tried to prove continuity from the past. In *The Discourse on the Worship of Priapus* the wearing of phallic amulets is described as ‘exactly similar to those which were worn by the ancient inhabitants of this country for the very same purpose’ and St Cosmo is named ‘the modern Priapus.’<sup>104</sup> In the letter published by Payne Knight, Hamilton says he was struck by the ‘conformity in ancient and modern superstition’ when he found out about the phallic amulets and the ceremonies themselves are described as ‘so very similar to that which attended the ancient cult of the God of the Gardens.’<sup>105</sup> Hamilton and Payne Knight specifically found continuity between the practices of rural Italian Catholics and their Roman ancestors. This particularly demonstrates how much of the early scholarship was influenced by contemporary thought; the protestant British generally perceived Catholicism negatively as old-

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<sup>103</sup> See Black 2003 for an in depth discussion of northern European visitors reactions to southern Italy in the eighteenth century and Luzzi 2008 for perceptions of Italy in the Romantic era.

<sup>104</sup> Payne Knight 1865: 5.

<sup>105</sup> Payne Knight 1865: 4.

fashioned and superstitious.<sup>106</sup> The idea that Catholics in Italy were still using pagan ritual plays into this wider sentiment.<sup>107</sup>

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the elites of Britain, France and Germany saw themselves as fully engaged with modernity. There was a keen interest in social and political progress and this contrasted dramatically with the observations of policy makers and social elites on their travels in Italy. Payne Knight and many of his contemporaries took part in the Grand Tour, developing an appreciation for antiquity but also finding Italy a comparatively poor, unstructured and superstitious place. Famously, Goethe who visited between 1786 and 1788 diarised his thoughts and provides some typical examples of these attitudes. One of the most striking aspects of his record is the strong desire to find something of the past in the contemporary Italian way of life.<sup>108</sup> When visiting Naples he stopped at some peasant houses and comments that they were 'perfect copies of the houses in Pompeii...Despite the lapse of so many centuries and such countless changes, this region still imposes on its inhabitants the same habits, tastes, amusements and style of living.'<sup>109</sup>

At the time Frazer composed the first edition of *The Golden Bough* comparative evolution was at the height of scientific discovery and he was not alone in focusing on the 'primitive'. European imperialism had brought people into contact with the world in a way never before experienced.<sup>110</sup> A concept of societal evolution that placed the leaders of the empires above their new subjects seemed both logical and desirable. The methodologies of Frazer used fertility rites to enhance this opinion by comparing the distant past of Europe, particularly Italy, with the practices of 'savage' societies across the world. In both the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as Mangarano has said, 'The cultural 'other' is thus figured as a historical reconstruction of our past, a key to our much elegised history.'<sup>111</sup> In this way we can see not just a continuation but a development of the desire to find the most historical forms of human religion whether that be by looking to contemporary

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<sup>106</sup> Black 2003: 142-165.

<sup>107</sup> Edwards 1999: 12 suggests that Protestants often preferred to identify with the Greeks because of the parallels often drawn between 'popery' and vice in ancient Rome. This may contextualise much of the writing about ancient art in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which was often pro-Greek and anti-Roman.

<sup>108</sup> Others had similar reactions, Hornsby 2000: 5 suggests that for visitors to Italy the past was admired but the present only tolerated.

<sup>109</sup> Goethe 1982: 105. See Fitton 2011 for more on Goethe's visits to ancient Italian sites. Goethe also wrote Roman elegies, Haile 1976 discusses the problems in the publication of these, which mirror the issues Payne Knight found with publication of his work.

<sup>110</sup> This had influences in all areas of society, for example, in the arts 'primitivism' was becoming a significant movement, and Gauguin and Rousseau were exhibiting works heavily influenced by tribal cultures.

<sup>111</sup> Mangarano 1992: 10.



Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 13:** Print showing a woman and a phallic herm from 'Mes Loisirs' published in 1764.

Photo:  
<http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=33010617+&cr=257&cl=1>.

practices that appear to be a remnant of the past or to the practices of more 'primitive' peoples considered to be more similar in mind to the people of ancient Europe. Both approaches conclude that western Europeans are the most 'civilised.'

Whilst works concerned with Priapus and paganism were fuelled by political and religious ideology as well as contemporary taste and aesthetics, they remained pervasive, lasting well into the nineteenth and even early twentieth century. They undoubtedly contributed to both the hunt for the origins of western society in ancient Italian culture and to the tendency to assign ancient origins to figures such as Priapus, which can still be seen in scholarship today. It is clear from these examples that the ways in which scholars embraced the concept of a prehistoric god, whose influence lasted for centuries, were as much a reflection of their own cultural concerns as they were an interest in learning about Roman religion. It is important to establish where these preconceptions originated if we are to move beyond them.

### Sex and Obscenity

The erotic nature of much Roman art has fascinated people since it was first discovered and images of Priapus are no exception. For centuries scholars have written about Priapus as the centre of 'debauched orgies' and this has pervaded in wider preconceptions of his image and cult.<sup>112</sup>

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<sup>112</sup> Langlands 2006: 3-9 outlines the way in which modern popular conceptions of Roman sexual practices are infused with notions of 'excess and depravity', orgies and decadence. This has both influenced modern perceptions of Priapus and been influenced by early perceptions of his cult.

Image removed due to permissions issue.

**Figure 14:** Drawing of Roman sarcophagus from Famin.  
Photo: Famin 1816: Plate VII.

It has been suggested by Foucault, amongst others, that the eighteenth century was a period of engagement with sexual nature and although there was a social code of conduct and etiquette surrounding it, a discourse of sexuality and interest in the erotic was present at all levels of society.<sup>113</sup> This can be seen in a range of media including erotic novels, scientific works, satires, cartoons and memoirs. With such an obviously sexual image, Priapus came to be used in erotic images and widely associated with 'obscene' activities. Some writers, such as Famin, clearly embraced the opportunity to present erotic material through a veil of historical enquiry. Others, such as Payne Knight, shied away from the erotic but could not avoid it altogether.<sup>114</sup> Although Payne Knight did not intend to publish 'pornography' the illustrations from his work were borrowed by publishers and engravers to illustrate works with a clear sexual aim.<sup>115</sup> Priapus was also a common image in eighteenth and nineteenth century erotic prints with many playing upon the stories of women having intercourse with his statues. One image is clearly adopted from Famin's illustration of a Bacchic sarcophagus showing a female satyr and statue but the female figure in this case has been altered to represent a contemporary woman (Figures 13 and 14). Many others depict the 'orgiastic' festivals in honour of the god (Figure 15).<sup>116</sup>

Images of Priapus were particularly relevant to emerging debates about morality, pornography and sexuality in eighteenth and nineteenth century society and so it will be helpful here to consider some brief definitions of the terms that have been most influential and relevant in examining these images. The concepts of eroticism and pornography are unavoidable in discussions of the image of Priapus; firstly because they are a strong influence in the societies in which the earliest works on

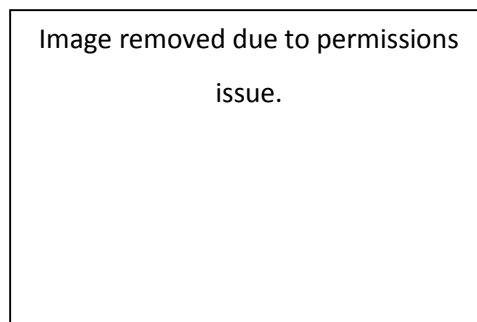
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<sup>113</sup> Foucault 1978-86. Also see Hitchcock 1997 for an examination of how this discourse changed sexual practice.

<sup>114</sup> Harvey 2004: 1-3 stresses that in eighteenth century culture discourses about eroticism were everywhere and not 'fenced off' from the rest of culture but attempts were often made to create a distance between subject and viewer. Perhaps this explains the motives of Famin in presenting 'historical' erotica.

<sup>115</sup> Rousseau 1987: 102.

<sup>116</sup> Priapus, particularly as a herm being worshipped, has featured in prints and paintings since the sixteenth century, for example, Nicolas Poussin (1594-1665) includes Priapus in several of his works including a drawing of 'The Birth of Priapus' (<https://www.royalcollection.org.uk/collection/911938/the-birth-of-priapus>).



**Figure 15:** Painted Ivory showing group sex and a statue of Priapus. 18th century. Private collection.

Photo:  
<http://www.lessingimages.com/viewimage.asp?i=40110111+&cr=16&cl=1>.

Priapus were written and secondly because they are heavily used as terms to describe priapic images today. There is an ongoing and lively debate about how these terms should be defined and used so here I will limit myself to explaining my intentions in using them.<sup>117</sup> The term 'erotic' I primarily use to describe something that may be interpreted as sexual in nature, including nudity and sensuality, but not necessarily sexually explicit although I include these also. I will try as far as possible to avoid the term 'pornographic' in relation to Roman art as it is a word bound up in the negativity towards sexuality and nudity in the nineteenth century. I will define it here as something that graphically represents something sexual with the specific intention of sexual gratification but generally it will be used to indicate the views of other, predominantly nineteenth century, scholars.<sup>118</sup>

Where there was criticism of published works, it is possible that it was not the subject of Priapus itself that was problematic but the fact it was associated with the phallicism of some of the more extravagant men's clubs, and new religious ideas in the texts, such as the implication that pagan worship is preferable to Christianity.<sup>119</sup> This may particularly have been the case with Payne Knight who was accused of promoting paganism. In 1790 J. T. Mathias, the librarian at Buckingham Palace, famously condemned the *Discourse*, describing it as 'Criminal Obscenity' and the images as containing 'all the odure and filth, all the antique pictures and all the representations of the

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<sup>117</sup> Nead 1992 and Harvey 2004 are good starting points for understanding sexual terms in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries but there are many other works that consider such language with specific reference to the ancient world; for example Richlin 1992b and Sorkin Rabinowitz 2002.

<sup>118</sup> Nead 1992 discusses the nineteenth century use of the terms 'pornography' and 'obscenity' (which will also be avoided here for similar reasons) and the negative implications of such language. She locates negativity in the influence of mass-market access and loss of control over access as an influence on the growing concerns about such material.

<sup>119</sup> Rousseau 1987: 102-105. Wallace 2007: 63 also suggests that Payne Knight was in fact a neo-pagan.

generative organs in their most odious and degrading protrusion.’<sup>120</sup> Perhaps most significantly he described it as intended for the ‘obscene revelling’s of Greek scholars in their private studies’, an accusation that has become almost common place in descriptions of scholars and publishers of erotic material.<sup>121</sup> It has been suggested that this criticism was motivated by some latent homosexuality in Mathias which was inflamed by the ‘obscene’ nature of the images, but, although the masculine and homosocial are important to understanding the eighteenth century social context in which the work was produced, laying accusations of homosexuality at the doors of its critics does not help in understanding the reactions to the work.<sup>122</sup> Instead it enhances the tendency to relate all scholarship of erotic material with sex and sexuality, a practice which distracts from understanding the purpose of images of Priapus. This theory, asserted by Rousseau, perhaps tells us more about twentieth century reactions to the sexuality of these images than it does those of the eighteenth.

By the nineteenth century Payne Knight was considered a corrupter of morals and unsuitable reading material.<sup>123</sup> His work was branded obscene and considered no different from the explicit works of Famin which had just been published in an English edition and, therefore, may have created a backlash against works addressing erotic subjects. To this day those eighteenth and nineteenth century writers who accessed or wrote about erotic works from the Roman world are often labelled as ‘pornophiles masquerading as scholars.’<sup>124</sup> This, however, is strongly influenced by the emphasis on Victorian morality which increasingly dominated nineteenth century reactions to the erotic material from the Roman world and still colours the language used to describe such material. Of course, some still wrote about sexual subjects, in fact, sexuality was turned into an area of scientific study in this era, but to tackle a subject like Priapus always required careful framing as scholarly study and always carried some reputational risk if it was badly received.

## Morality

As with most sexual material, it is now difficult when studying Priapus to avoid a moralising tendency that either seeks to ignore (and in some cases destroy evidence of) Roman practices considered distasteful to contemporary sensibilities or that imposes a narrative of retribution upon the Romans for doing so. We have seen that each writer who dealt in any significant way with the nature of Priapus faced criticism or felt compelled to pre-empt any questioning of their intentions by taking an

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<sup>120</sup> Quoted in Rousseau 1987: 112-130.

<sup>121</sup> Quoted in Rousseau 1987: 112-130.

<sup>122</sup> Rousseau 1987: 123.

<sup>123</sup> Rousseau 1987: 132.

<sup>124</sup> Fisher and Langlands 2011: 310.

apologetic tone in emphasising the scientific reasoning behind the work. We have also seen how the tone changed over time from Payne Knight's eighteenth century explanations of the importance of phallic worship to Famin's early nineteenth century, thinly veiled eroticism to the outright condemnation in Wright's work in 1865. The way in which the issue of morality was approached is reflected in these changes from a largely self-regulating society that could discuss sexuality as long as etiquette was followed to a society that aimed to hide and shame all aspects of nudity and sex. Priapus became a taboo and, although we can once again openly discuss his image, the legacy of Christian morality still affects the perception of Priapus' image and, in some cases, restricts viewing of it.

The decline of Rome was a popular theme in the nineteenth century and is typified by Westropp, who writing about phallic worship in different cultures, identified three phases in the use of the phallus. Firstly the phallus is an object of 'religious reverence,' then it becomes 'apotropaic' and finally it is used only for 'licentiousness and dissolute morals.'<sup>125</sup> In his discussion of Priapus as a Roman god Dulaure had primarily focused on the decline from rustic and pure fertility cult to an excuse for debauchery and orgies. He states that among the Romans the cult had 'degenerated a great deal', so much so that Priapus became a figure of ridicule rather than veneration.<sup>126</sup> The notion of decline further emphasises the importance of finding the 'origins' of phallic worship for these scholars. Concepts of tracing arcs of civilisations and cultural developments in the scholarly work of the eighteenth century, best exemplified in the works of Winckelmann and Gibbon, developed an idea of the decline of the Roman Empire, which during the nineteenth century, increasingly became adapted to a Christian, moralising discourse warning against luxury and pleasure.<sup>127</sup>

The idea of a 'Secret Cabinet' as a form of moral censorship is also associated with the nineteenth century.<sup>128</sup> It ties strongly into the notion of 'pornography' that was developing at the time and a desire to 'protect' the weak from 'corrupting' images. However, relegation to such secret cabinets often makes explicit images, including those of Priapus, seem more shocking, risqué and titillating. The most famous room of this type was the *Gabinetto Segreto* in Naples which has been the subject

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<sup>125</sup> Westropp 1875: 30-31.

<sup>126</sup> Dulaure 1805: 120-121.

<sup>127</sup> Gibbon 1994; Winckelmann 1764.

<sup>128</sup> I use the 'secret cabinet' here as a term to describe museums with restricted access created for objects considered potentially damaging to some members of the public by organisations such as museums, not all of these restrictions necessarily took the form of a separate room.

of much recent debate.<sup>129</sup> Clarke claims that any painting found at Pompeii and considered obscene by excavators was destroyed or sent to the 'pornographic cabinet' (the use of 'pornographic' in this usual rendering of the title goes even further to emphasise the sexual nature of these images) but in reality the situation was much more complex and the secret cabinet in Naples was not established as an entity to which objects could be sent at the time of the eighteenth century excavations.<sup>130</sup> Furthermore, Kate Fisher and Rebecca Langlands have suggested that the stories about the establishment of the secret cabinet, most of which appear to be exaggerated or untrue, encourage us to see the censorship ideal as an eighteenth century construct.<sup>131</sup> Mary Beard has recently described the secret cabinet as 'as much a state of mind as any particular physical location' emphasising the way that the idea of keeping sexual material hidden was more significant than the practice.<sup>132</sup>

In reality these hidden rooms were highly ineffective. The works of Famin and other erotic publishers were in circulation for most of the nineteenth century and it is likely many more had access to material from Pompeii in this way than would ever have visited Naples.<sup>133</sup> There are several Priapus statues in the secret cabinet to this day, including the Priapus sprinkling his phallus we examined earlier (Figure 9), and the implications of being labelled as a 'pornographic' item hidden from view strongly influences approaches to his image and shows the persistent effects of the nineteenth century moralists.<sup>134</sup> Now the *Gabinetto Segreto* is accessible to all visitors to the museum but it plays upon the notion of containing 'obscene' items with false bars and locks which encourages visitors to see the content as taboo.<sup>135</sup>

From the strong desire to locate Priapus in prehistory to a strong emphasis on eroticism and sexual religious rites many of the issues that come to light in the works of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries are still present in twentieth century approaches to Priapus. Catherine Johns, for example, speaks of male fertility deities as having an 'early and obscure' origin and Judith Harris states that

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<sup>129</sup> There was also a 'secret cabinet' in the British Museum which primarily started with the collection of George Witt in 1856, although the museum had erotic material before that date including donations from Hamilton and Payne Knight. Wallace 2007: 34 suggests that he may have donated his collection of erotica to the museum in order to avoid the censure of his peers.

<sup>130</sup> Beard 2012a: 64.

<sup>131</sup> Fisher and Langlands 2011: 308.

<sup>132</sup> Beard 2012a: 66.

<sup>133</sup> Beard 2012a: 68.

<sup>134</sup> Nead 1992: 92 emphasises that segregation of 'dangerous' objects imbues them with a pornographic meaning they did not originally carry.

<sup>135</sup> Wallace 2007: 39 discusses this reopening and says the secret cabinet room is one of the most visited parts of the museum. See Levin-Richardson 2011 for analysis of visitors and their understanding of the material.

'his cult dates from pre-history and perhaps pre-human history,' while W. H. Parker focuses on the debauched cult activities.<sup>136</sup> As we have seen in the introduction to this thesis, in some of the best recent work Priapus has been considered as a feature of republican and imperial Roman culture in his own right. By examining him in the context of the art and literature that we do have much more can be gleaned than in attempts to identify a cult for him in a past so distant it has not left a trace. By specifically grounding studies in his imagery we can create a firm base from which to contextualise the literary references (as we will see, Roman writers often had their own agendas and concerns). We will discover that the Romans specifically used Priapus in depictions of a rustic idyll but this was a creation of the first centuries BCE and CE rather than a record of an actual ancient past. They were constructing an image of antiquity to reflect their contemporary concerns and therefore do not provide the concrete evidence of ancient ritual many scholars claim they do. In order better to understand from where the construct of Priapus as a figure from the distant past came and to unravel further the process by which our preconception of images of Priapus have been established it is necessary to return to representations of Priapus from first century BCE and CE Roman world and consider them in their own cultural context.

## **Greek Origins and Roman Contexts**

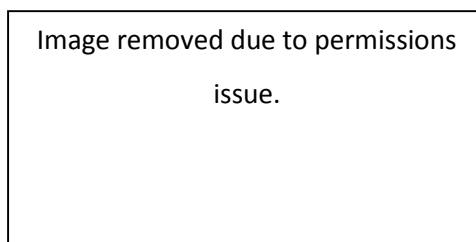
Scholars of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries did not invent an association between Priapus and fertility, nor were notions of ancient origins and rustic cults created by modern scholars; instead these ideas respond to an ideal created in the late republic and early empire. We will now examine how the Romans used Priapus, and the fertility connotations of his image, in the construction of cultural identities that validated the rural past.

From the late republic onwards, a wide variety of artistic and literary outputs show the Romans themselves were deeply concerned with their agricultural heritage. Roman writers often seem preoccupied with condemning luxury or glorifying a rustic idyll and art provides a visual manifestation of the same themes. An early imperial relief base in the Vatican pairs Bacchic scenes with simple pastoral scenes such as a man milking a goat and a woman holding a deer (Figure 16). The figures on this base, possibly from an altar, are accompanied by statues of Priapus, Spes and Hercules.<sup>137</sup> This combination of pastoral and Bacchic figures associate these images with the world of the sacral-idyllic landscape that we will examine thoroughly in Chapter Four, but more significant

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<sup>136</sup> Johns 1982: 42; Harris 2007: 115; Parker 1988.

<sup>137</sup> Stewart 1997: 581 for a longer description of the base and additional detail about the identification of the statues.



**Figure 16:** Details of a marble base showing Priapus with Bacchic figures. Early imperial. Rome, Vatican Museums.  
Photo: Stewart 1997: 580.

here is the use of scenes of peasants at work as a decorative motif.<sup>138</sup> The Amiternum Couch discussed earlier also shows a rural working scene and, along with other scenes that show Priapus watching agricultural activity, these objects suggest a strong interest in the bucolic. We will see that, although there is little evidence to suggest that he was actually present in the ancient (or contemporary) Italian countryside, Priapus' image became symbolic of an ideal rustic world in which *pietas* and modesty were very important. This world was often associated with the past but as it is a sophisticated, artificial creation of urban Romans it is essentially timeless. Within this context the image of Priapus is a significant part of Roman discourse about values and identities.

Gowing has suggested that remembering the past was, for the Romans, central to their self-worth and self-identity but history and memory were indistinguishable and could be created.<sup>139</sup> Beard, North and Price have highlighted the fact that accounts of early Rome are an image of a sophisticated society and 'more like the city of the first century BCE than the hamlet of the eighth century.'<sup>140</sup> Therefore, much Roman discussion of the past should be considered as contemporary myths that reflect contemporary concerns and ideas. Recently, those exploring the cultural changes in Rome at the end of the republic such as Galinsky and Wallace-Hadrill have shown that concepts of the past are relevant to a wide array of material from this era.<sup>141</sup> In this period, in which many Priapus images (in both art and text) were created, Roman culture was undergoing significant changes in its political and social structure and there was much anxiety about identity. Some reacted by condemning the importation of 'foreign' ideas and luxuries, so harking back to an ideal past, albeit a past created to reflect their contemporary concerns; others looked to an ideal of rustic

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<sup>138</sup> Stewart 1997: 581.

<sup>139</sup> Gowing 2005: 10.

<sup>140</sup> Beard, North and Price 1998: 4.

<sup>141</sup> Galinsky 1996; Wallace-Hadrill 2008 25 calls that the idea of Rome before 200 BCE as more authentically Roman 'purest myth' generated for rhetorical purposes.



peace and fulfilment. It is perhaps ironic that although Priapus was a foreign import from the east he came to be associated with the Roman cultural identity sought by these groups.

### Priapus and the East

Roman writers generally agree that Priapus came from the Hellespont. Virgil in the *Georgics*, a poem about agriculture composed around 29 BCE, calls him 'Lord of the Hellespont' whereas Catullus, in his poems of the first half of the first century BCE, specifically tells us Lampsacus is his home and Pausanias, writing in Greek in the second century CE, notes that he is revered more by the people of Lampsacus than any other god.<sup>142</sup> This is supported somewhat by the coinage featuring Priapus which seems to originate exclusively in the area around Lampsacus, but our focus here is not the actual origins of the god Priapus, rather we are interested in the way in which the Romans presented and used his origins in discourses about themselves.<sup>143</sup> In reality, the Romans, although aware of Priapus' eastern origins, do not appear concerned with the actual source of Priapus' cult when they use his image in art and poetry, instead the focus is on how he can represent their ideas about their own cultural values.

Although the Romans clearly recognise Priapus as a god from the east in literature, their approach to his image and mythology does not generally reflect this as he is not labelled a 'foreign' god in the way many others were in the late republic and early empire.<sup>144</sup> Of course it is debatable to what extent any deity is truly 'Roman', as archaeological evidence from Italy shows that the Romans were incorporating deities and religious ideas from other cultures into their own pantheon from the earliest times, but it is interesting that in an era when 'foreign' influence was being debated by Roman writers a Greek god could also be quietly adopted as part of Roman history.<sup>145</sup> By the late republic, some Roman writers had created a rhetorical trope which associated Greece and its culture with luxury and, more negatively, decadence, and used that as an image against which to define themselves, an issue we will explore in detail in Chapter Three.<sup>146</sup> This often took the form of contrasting a 'virtuous primitive Italy' with the 'decadent' Greek and Asian east.<sup>147</sup> Meanwhile,

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<sup>142</sup> Virg. *G.* 4.103; Catull. 18; Paus. 9.31.

<sup>143</sup> See Parker 1988 and Herter 1932 for a more comprehensive overview of the evidence relating to Priapus as a Greek god.

<sup>144</sup> Orlin 2010, 12 has suggested that the difficulties scholars have in defining foreign and Roman cults shows that the Romans themselves did not formalise the distinction even though they recognised a difference.

<sup>145</sup> See Orlin 2010, Beard 2012b and Beard, North and Price 1998 for discussions about 'foreign' cults and Roman religion.

<sup>146</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 23.

<sup>147</sup> Orlin 2010.

however, many of the ways in which the Romans began to explore and express their national identity were inspired by Greek culture. Virgil adopts many traits of Greek epic to structure *The Aeneid*, Augustan poets experiment with Greek forms, art uses classical and archaic styles to indicate a Roman past and Roman virtues and Greek writers tackle Roman history.<sup>148</sup> The negative approaches to Greek culture are well documented yet they frequently show the ambivalence of the Romans as they use adopted Greek rhetorical styles to levy their criticism.

In Book One of the *Tusculan Disputations*, written around 45 BCE, Cicero sets out clearly to define the areas in which the Romans are better than the Greeks. He only accepts learning as an area in which the Greeks did well but adds the caveat that the Romans were not even competing in this field, yet he makes his arguments using Greek philosophical dialogue as the format.<sup>149</sup> Octavian used an array of anti-eastern rhetoric in his condemnations of Antony but is well known for his revival of Classical Greek styles in many artistic genres.<sup>150</sup> This demonstrates the way in which the Romans selected the parts of Greek culture they wanted to admire and adopt. In rhetoric this often took the form of praise for Classical Greece, which was seen to conform more closely to Roman ideals, and disgust at the extravagance of Hellenistic Greece, however, in reality all manner of eastern influences were used in art and literature. The ambivalence towards all things Greek is perhaps unsurprising as many elite Romans were taught by Greeks, initially captives but later voluntary immigrants, and it has been suggested that without the interactions this brought the classical revival and flourishing of the arts in the first century BCE could not have happened.<sup>151</sup> Cicero exemplifies the ambivalence as he was taught by Greek rhetoricians and is credited with introducing Greek philosophy to Rome yet he states that 'in one way or another we surpass them on every point' when summarising the interaction between Greek and Roman culture.<sup>152</sup>

Priapus is typical of this ambivalence to Greek identity and throughout this thesis we will develop the idea that his image exemplifies the fluid relationship between Greek and Roman visual culture in the late republic and early imperial era. The fact that many of the tools the Romans used to express themselves were Greek in origin appears to be swept aside and they are accepted as Roman culture

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<sup>148</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 20. Also see Schmitz and Waiter 2011 for detail on the influence of the Greeks in Rome and both Greek and Roman reactions to this.

<sup>149</sup> Cic. *Tusc.* 1.1.

<sup>150</sup> Castriota 1995 discusses at length the associations drawn between Octavian and classicism and Antony and Hellenistic styles. He also argues this was represented in their choices of patron deities; Apollo and Bacchus respectively.

<sup>151</sup> Hidber 2011: 116.

<sup>152</sup> Cic. *Tusc.* 1.1; Erskine 1997: 35-45; Boatwright 2012: 79.

even to the point of being used to condemn the Greek culture that created them. Priapus too, although acknowledged as Greek in many histories, is used as an image to express Roman identity to the point that his 'Greekness' becomes dispensable and he is even presented as a longstanding feature of the Italian landscape, as we have seen in his inclusion with peasants in the Vatican reliefs (Figures 16). In some images his statue even seems to grow from the land itself, as we will see later in this chapter. Yet the image of Priapus often retains some eastern elements both in the tendency to use Greek artistic styles to portray him and in the dress he wears (when he is dressed). We see, for example, images in which he wears a Phrygian cap as he does in the painting from House II.9.1 in Pompeii (Figure 3).

Recent work on Roman culture has started to explore the interaction of Greek and Roman culture from the late republic onwards showing that it was possible to have multiple identities in the Roman world and therefore to be simultaneously Greek and Roman, or have an identity defined by a culture shared with peers not based on nationality.<sup>153</sup> Clearly, this caused a great deal of anxiety for some Romans but for others it provided an array of ways to define and express themselves. Priapus' image reflects this cultural discourse of assimilation, tradition and identity. We will see through the thesis that there is a continuous redefinition of the boundaries of Roman identities, particularly in the ways Greek mythology and motifs are used to create a visual culture that manifestly represents Roman values and tradition, whilst engaging with contemporary urban life.<sup>154</sup> The use of Priapus as a motif of rusticity reflects the complexities of cultural definition in the Roman world.

### Priapus and the 'Cultural Revolution'

Many representations of Priapus were created as the republic came to an end in rivalry and conflict and the principate was established in the first centuries BCE and CE. At the same time, the Roman Empire continued to expand. Inevitably these events led to great social as well as political change. Significantly, citizenship was being extended, more and more people were becoming wealthy, and communication with an increasingly diverse community was becoming an essential part of Roman culture.<sup>155</sup> It is unsurprising that amongst these changes we find Romans trying to define their identity and interrogate what it meant to be Roman.

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<sup>153</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 17.

<sup>154</sup> Newby 2016.

<sup>155</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 441-454.

The expansion of Rome as a political and cultural entity opened up many questions for Romans. Beard sums up the difficulties for Roman culture as 'dark uncertainty about its own identity' and goes on to explain the problem by asking; 'What was to count as 'Roman' tradition in a world in which all kinds of 'other' activities came within the vast geopolitical domain which came to be defined as 'Roman'? What was it to be 'Roman' in any definable sense when Rome was synonymous with the world?'<sup>156</sup> This confusion over definitions of identity and citizenship led to a strong interest in defining status through artistic and educational means as well as wealth.<sup>157</sup> Items such as the Amiternum Couch were used to display connoisseurship and affluence, and established an informal cultural hierarchy. As Wallace-Hadrill notes, 'citizenship is no longer expressed through actions but through symbols' and we often find the image of Priapus incorporated in such symbols.<sup>158</sup>

Throughout this thesis we examine different aspects of identity but here we focus on one of the ways in which the Romans expressed their identity, looking to their past and traditions. Particularly they emphasised rural and agricultural traditions, which we will focus on in detail later; thus we find rustic images like Priapus on luxurious items allowing patrons to identify themselves simultaneously as wealthy urbanites and as proponents of Roman values embedded in notions of self-sufficiency and rural piety. In this era of social and political change there is a particular emphasis on shared culture and traditions as opposed to the greatness individuals and families that dominated most of the republican era. Yet many of these traditions were invented and, as we have discussed earlier, reflections of contemporary values. Hobsbawm and Ranger in their seminal work on invented traditions described them as 'responses to novel situations which take the form of reference to old situations or which establish their own past.'<sup>159</sup> Using this notion of manufacturing tradition we can see that the image of Priapus, which was constructed to reflect an idealised past, is a mirror of the methods by which the Romans sought to define themselves and come to terms with the changes to their society.

One aspect of Roman identity for which Romans sought *exempla* in the past was masculinity. As we have seen when looking at the phallus as key to understanding Priapus' image, Roman masculinity was traditionally expressed through dominance and aggression. However, in the early empire new influences were changing 'manly' behaviour and so many looked to traditional models of masculinity as they were thought to be a key element in previous successes of the Roman people and they

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<sup>156</sup> Beard 2012b: 352.

<sup>157</sup> Dench 2005: 96.

<sup>158</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 452.

<sup>159</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 2.

provided a standard as to what was (and was not) acceptable behaviour. This type of masculinity, symbolised by the phallus, is found in the depiction of peasants, soldiers and gladiators, with whom Priapus is associated in visual culture. Alston has discussed at length the ways in which Roman soldiers were able to exercise masculine power and authority. He also notes that even though the urban elites sought to distance themselves from notions of violence and loss of control, within their homes they continued to exercise their right to power through violence over their household.<sup>160</sup> Also notable is the association in elite literary culture of violence with sexual conquest: the elegists frequently use military metaphors in their accounts of seduction which are often violent encounters and Ovid states in the *Amores*, 'Every lover is a soldier'.<sup>161</sup> Collectively, the Roman people clearly associated dominance through violence and might with success, this can be seen in the public monuments, such as triumphal arches, that celebrate military endeavour. Although most scholarly attention has been focused on the elite construction of masculinity as primarily displayed through self-control, this does not preclude the continuation of other expressions of masculinity that retained space for violent and sexual behaviour as a form of power – sometimes represented visually by the phallus and, thus, Priapus. In Chapter Two we will explore how this phallic power could be used as an *apotropeion*.

Like soldiers, gladiators, although on the margins of society, were held up as examples of bravery and virility. We will return to look at the associations between Priapus and gladiators more fully in Chapter Four, but it is worth noting here a gladiator helmet from Pompeii (Figure 112) that combines the masculine prowess of armour with decoration that recalls the piety and tradition of the rural past through its decoration, which shows a dedication to a statue of Priapus. Like the soldier and the gladiator, Priapus exemplifies masculinity and the aggression and violence inherently bound up with it. The hardness of the image of Priapus, in respect of the phallus, the simplicity of his image and his rigid, carved appearance, speaks to an aspect of Roman identity that sought to define masculinity in opposition to the softness and indulgence of Rome's eastern neighbours; characterising the Roman as self-sufficient, pious and powerful through the dominance of subordinates. Like Priapus in the visual imagery, the inviolable body of the Roman male, and by extension the Roman State, was a powerful penetrator of 'others'.

Under changing political circumstances, masculinity was becoming a contested and fluid concept. In this chapter we are primarily concerned with the ways in which it relates to the popularity of

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<sup>160</sup> Alston 1998: 215-281.

<sup>161</sup> Ov. *Am.* 1.9.1.

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issue.

**Figure 17:** Marble relief showing a Priapus statue harvesting grapes.  
Early imperial. Rome, Vatican Museums.

Photo:

[http://www.scalarchives.com/web/dettaglio\\_immagine.asp?idImmagine=0076139&posizione=5&inCarrello=False&numImmagini=23](http://www.scalarchives.com/web/dettaglio_immagine.asp?idImmagine=0076139&posizione=5&inCarrello=False&numImmagini=23) [accessed 28/04/18].

defining Roman identity through the idealised past, a simpler, cruder time as seen in many images of Priapus. However, throughout this thesis we will return to the theme in order to explore the variations and contradictions in both the visual and literary representations: in Chapter Two we will explore how men could be mocked for their lack of self-control and their effeminacy; in Chapter Three we will return to the subject from the perspective of the influence of luxury and education upon the masculinity of the literary class of Roman society and see how the relationship to these Greek imports in many ways disrupts the Roman masculine ideals set out here; and in Chapter Four we will return to the idea of masculinity and violence, particularly in the Roman man's ability to conquer and subordinate other nations through empire.

Alongside the violence and aggression of masculine culture, the public art created during the early principate suggests that there was also an appreciation of peace and stability, which some have linked to the upheaval of the civil war. In both public and private art, images and motifs that reflect these ideals flourish in the early empire.<sup>162</sup> Many images of Priapus show how these two discourses, an interest in traditions that reflect Roman *mores* and a desire to celebrate peace and harmony in the present, were brought together often in the idealised and timeless world of a 'golden age' that endorsed, supposedly, ancient values and simple rustic lifestyles, where masculinity could be shown through patriarchal rule of domesticity. It is worth being clear here that in using the term 'golden age' I am not specifically linking images of Priapus to the public art of the Augustan era but instead I refer to a wider cultural interest in a rural ideal that was thought of by some as a lost age of Saturn, and by others as a contemporary possibility achievable through upholding traditional values and

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<sup>162</sup> Zanker 1988 asserts that the public mood strongly influenced the private sphere. Rosati 2006: 52 suggests that the golden age was particularly embraced by the privately wealthy as it legitimised their elite lifestyle.

rejecting foreign and/or state influence.<sup>163</sup> The ideals of peace and prosperity are clearly expressed in a relief now in the Vatican that shows Priapus as a solitary figure harvesting bountiful vines (Figure 17).<sup>164</sup> Although many images that feature Priapus in agricultural or rustic settings evoke a sense of stability and affluence, the beautiful rendering of the lone figure with a bag full of fruit on his back and swirling plants around him creates an impression of an undisturbed idyll.<sup>165</sup>

The desire to find a time of peace and abundance in the past is often explicit in the literature of writers addressing Roman history. In particular, Roman writers establish a heritage that spoke of what they considered fundamental Roman values, such as piety and austerity. These values could then be used as a standard for the present and contemporary Rome could be compared, both positively and, in some cases, negatively to its own idealised past. Varro in his treatises *On Agriculture* and *On the Latin Language* plays a key part in establishing the rhetoric of the first century BCE. The ideals of reverence for the past and sustainability through Italian farming are heavily promoted in his works and there is a strong focus on the way the past has shaped the contemporary Roman world. One of the most interesting writers of significance here is Dionysius of Halicarnassus, a Greek writing a history of the Roman peoples.<sup>166</sup> Dionysius is very explicit in his acknowledgements that the Romans are the greatest race and that is due to their past, which he inextricably links to the Greeks.<sup>167</sup> In the works of writers of the first century BCE humble origins, agriculture and virtues such as *pietas* come to the fore, and images of Priapus emphasise and mirror these concerns both in the *anasyrma* types, which we have seen reflect an ideal of agricultural prosperity through the abundance of fruit, and in the pairing of Priapus with scenes of pious and industrious peasants as seen in the Vatican base (Figure 16).

## Images of Cult Activity

Often the Romans depicted Priapus in rustic scenes as the object of religious worship. We have many examples of images that depict worship of Priapus but, without corresponding archaeological

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<sup>163</sup> Verg, *Aen.* 8, for example, looks both to the past golden age and suggests a new golden age for the future. There is a large body of work on the 'golden age'; Barker 1996 looks at the concept of a golden people in imperial Rome; Evans 2003 looks at the association of a golden age with utopia.

<sup>164</sup> Although this Priapus is now missing his phallus the context, appearance and fact he is fixed to a plinth all support the attribution.

<sup>165</sup> Bonn 1989: 7 suggests that the presence on vines always indicates being present in 'sensuous abundance'; von Stackleberg 2009: 33 also associates this kind of vegetative imagery with the golden age of the principate.

<sup>166</sup> He was not the only Greek engaged in this kind of project of constructing an identity for the Romans. See Schmitz and Waiter 2011 for examples of other Greek writers engaging with Roman culture.

<sup>167</sup> Gabba 1991: 10 explains that the Greek character of the Romans was the central concern of his work.



**Figure 18:** Fresco of a man sacrificing to Priapus from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

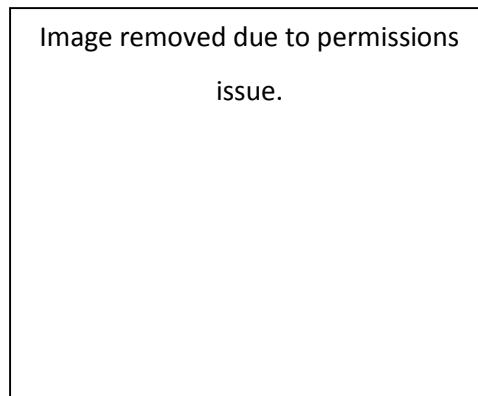
Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

evidence, it is difficult to connect these images with any specific cult practice. Of course, this does not mean there was not a cult of Priapus but that the evidence is unclear and in this chapter the thesis will be on the ways in which cult was depicted as part of urban visual culture. The images we have show herm-like statues of Priapus garlanded and offered libations; offerings of fruit are often made and sometimes the sacrifice of a small rustic animal such as a goat or pig is depicted. For example, a painting in the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii shows a pig being led to a very basic Priapus herm to be sacrificed (Figure 18). It is notable that this image from the Villa of the Mysteries is from a wealthy house with a variety of decoration related to cult activity.<sup>168</sup> The most common offering to Priapus in the literature is the apple and this same scene shows a table or crude altar with apples on top. It would be reasonable to assume that, as there are so many of these images, at least the concept of offering to Priapus was familiar to the Roman populace. However, the fact that so many of the scenes are from urban contexts and also contain mythical elements such as erotes, satyrs and *silanoi* render it very difficult to conclude they should be treated as straightforward depictions of Roman worship of Priapus. Instead of searching for evidence of a cult to Priapus, we should see these images as visual motifs designed to evoke the feeling of rustic cult as part of the wider discourses about an idyllic rustic world and the origins of Roman religion. Specifically, these images seem to reflect the interest in traditional values like piety and often they show the abundance brought about by the benevolence of Priapus when he is appropriately honoured by humble peasant Romans.

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<sup>168</sup> The Villa of the Mysteries and its decoration has been explored in many books, articles and theses, the essays in Gazda 2000 provide a good overview.





**Figure 19:** Sardonyx cameo. Imperial. Paris, National Library of France.

Photo:

[http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/794?vc=ePkH4LF7lZVNrsIwDISvEnEBao\\_t2sdhyQ69-y\\_eFyQQEisWozaeL5P-pPV3e7q8Oohfftkf1-9H9PEa3p-Hn7b8dKSVvITNaabEhU5ErcEarlXwG7\\_xG7](http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/794?vc=ePkH4LF7lZVNrsIwDISvEnEBao_t2sdhyQ69-y_eFyQQEisWozaeL5P-pPV3e7q8Oohfftkf1-9H9PEa3p-Hn7b8dKSVvITNaabEhU5ErcEarlXwG7_xG7) [accessed 15/03/18].

### ***The Peasant Cult***

A common type of depiction shows Priapus being worshipped outdoors in a rustic environment, usually surrounded by trees and rock. Most images show a Priapus idol, a basic herm shape with a prominent phallus, on a rock or tree being offered rudimentary offerings in rustic bowls or jugs by a group usually a man and a woman but sometimes more. There are many examples but a small sardonyx cameo now in Paris illustrates the type well (Figure 19). In this gem we see many of the typical *topoi* of images of worship of Priapus, a man (probably a *silenos*) plays a double flute whilst women, in this case one old and one young, carry offerings of fruit and a liquid in a jug. There is also wrapped object in the hands of the old woman which is probably a phallus.<sup>169</sup> The Priapus idol sits high on a rock or a tree stump surrounded by the branches of another tree and conforms to the representation of a basic herm with phallus. The simplicity of this scene is clearly intentional and must have marked a stark contrast with the reality of extravagant, urban temple building and religious ceremony of the early imperial period when this was created.

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<sup>169</sup> A wrapped phallus is often associated with Bacchic cult images, although many have taken it as evidence of actual cult practice. See Bowden 2010, Nilsson 1957 and Otto 1965 for discussions of the symbol and Bacchic cult. Hickson-Hahn 2011 is a useful introduction to how prayers and rituals may have been performed. However, the use of images such as these as evidence for actual cult practice should be treated very cautiously.



**Figure 20:** Carnelian gem. 1<sup>st</sup> Century CE. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.  
 Photo: ©KHM-Museumsverband  
<https://www.khm.at/objektdb/detail/59665/>  
 [accessed 18/05/18].

The depictions of priapic cult are mirrored in several of the poems in the *Priapea* related to worship. In one poem, Priapus tells us he receives a variety of offerings:

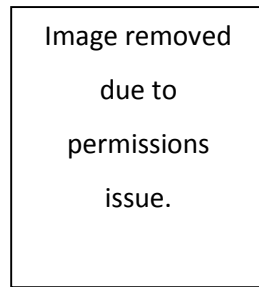
On me are placed a many-tinted wreath of early spring flowers and  
 the soft green blade and ear of the tender corn. Saffron coloured  
 violets, the orange-hued poppy, wan gourds, sweet-scented apples,  
 and the purpling grape trained in the shade of the vine are offered  
 to me. Sometimes (but keep silent as to this) even the bearded he-  
 goat and the horny-footed nanny sprinkle my altar with blood.<sup>170</sup>

Images occasionally show animal sacrifice to Priapus although they are not common. Frequently the victim is a goat but pigs and bulls also occur. A first century CE carnelian gem in Vienna shows a partially nude woman offering a cake and libation to a herm of Priapus while a nude man carries a goat to the altar (Figure 20). Offerings to Priapus are usually simplistic and representative of the rural areas he is said to protect. As the poem shows, he often receives flowers and fruits from the lands he guards. Peter Dorsey states that milk was the libation made to Priapus as he was one of the old Italic gods, although this opinion is presumably based on Roman literature.<sup>171</sup> Of course, as we have seen, he was not an ancient Italic god at all but the idea resonates with the ideal the Romans were trying to cultivate: a world of simple idols that receive traditional peasant offerings. Virgil's *Eclogue 7*, one of a series of poems dedicated to bucolic themes, clearly shows how first century BCE authors played a part in creating the impression of a humble peasant god:

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<sup>170</sup> Priap. 88 in Burton and Smithers 1995.

<sup>171</sup> Dorsey 1992: 27.



**Figure 21:** Marble relief with Priapus and Bacchus in archaic style. 2nd century CE. Private Collection.

Photo: Nilsson 1957: 100.

A bowl of milk, Priapus, and these cakes

Yearly it's enough for thee to claim;

Thou art the guardian of a poor man's plot.<sup>172</sup>

One of the most interesting images that appear to show a cult offering made to Priapus is discussed by Nilsson (Figure 21).<sup>173</sup> It is a relief in a private collection showing a bearded Priapus herm on an altar with a cornucopia and agricultural knife. The altar has fruits and the head of a goat. There is also a figure in an archaistic style, a clear and deliberate attempt to add an air of antiquity to the image, who is laying grapes on the altar. The figure has been identified as Bacchus on account of the similarity to other images of Bacchus and the presence of both a diadem and grapes. Nilsson refuses to accept this analysis and states it is 'impossible' and instead labels the figure as a priest dressed as Bacchus.<sup>174</sup> This is a manifestation of the desire to find evidence for actual cult practices in Roman images even though the presence of deities strongly suggests this is not a reflection of real life but a motif that represents fertility and a sacral-idyllic other-worldliness. The combination here of the phallic Priapus and Bacchus, the god of the fertility of the vine, is a scene in which nature's abundance in all its forms is represented. It is not unusual to see Priapus represented either with Bacchus or as part of his retinue and in images such as this we see that the rustic idyll the Romans were creating could be inhabited by mythological figures as well as peasant farmers. Therefore, we should perhaps be prepared to consider all images of Priapus in a fertility role as potential representations of an 'other world' or 'golden age' in which reality and time are suspended but a sense of tradition is all important.<sup>175</sup> In his interpretation Nilsson exemplifies a strong tendency in some twentieth century scholarship to take Roman images at face value in an attempt to discover

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<sup>172</sup> Virg. *Ecl.* 7.33-36. Trans. Day Lewis 2009.

<sup>173</sup> Nilsson 1957: 99-106.

<sup>174</sup> Nilsson 1957: 102-103.

<sup>175</sup> Zanker 2012: 151 proposes that the mingling of bucolic and mythological figures in Bacchic scenes supplants realism and creates a 'fairy tale world of happiness and joy'.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 22:** Brown jasper  
gem with yellow ground.  
Cambridge, Corpus  
Christi Lewis Collection.  
Photo: Henig. 1975: 77.

links to cult practices of a distant Roman past.<sup>176</sup> This leaves him unable to appreciate the ingenuity and playfulness with which Romans manipulated the motifs in compositions to present abstract ideas and ideals.

### ***The Orgiastic Cult***

We have seen that it is common for writers to state that Priapus was the centre of an orgiastic cult. There is little in the Roman visual record to support the idea that this was a reality in urban centres but there are some explicit images with a Priapus herm and many gems do have depictions of worship that involve nudity. A high quality, brown jasper gem from the Lewis Collection in Cambridge provides a clear example (Figure 22). Two women are seen adorning a herm of Priapus with garlands, one stands to wrap a garland around his neck and another kneels, either passing items to the standing figure or adorning/anointing the phallus. The nudity and sexual imagery in some representations has probably contributed to some of the views held by scholars that Priapus' cult was based upon highly sexual behaviour. Parker describes 'secret orgiastic rites in which he [Priapus] was worshipped by frenzied rites in the city and which he had developed from his cult as a fertility god'.<sup>177</sup> However, given the context we have established for other images of offerings to Priapus, it is much more likely that such women are supposed to represent mythological beings, perhaps nymphs or even Venus, and not Roman devotees.<sup>178</sup> The tranquil setting in some of these images in which small springs pour from rocks, from which Priapus himself almost seem to grow directly, suggest an unspoilt and simple rural world similar to many of the other scenes in which we have found Priapus' image. This is evident in gems, again frequently replicated, in which a female figure stands before a Priapus at a water source (Figure 48). It seems that including Priapus' image in a rustic setting such as this is a short hand for evoking the peaceful past of the 'golden age'.

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<sup>176</sup> For example, Le Glay 1986 and Dumezil 1996 seek evidence for archaic cults.

<sup>177</sup> Parker 1988: 28.

<sup>178</sup> This is supported by the figures on the Vicarello Goblet (Figure 54) where a mainly nude woman, similar in style to the female figures on these gems, is seated with the herm of Priapus and maenads and satyrs dance around the rest of the cup. Larson 2001: 94 argues that this kind of nudity is primarily associated with nymphs and is a symbol of their overt sexuality and divinity.

Parker is not alone in describing an orgiastic cult devoted to Priapus; Johns says fertility rites could include overt sexual activities and Grant describes the rites as 'uninhibited'.<sup>179</sup> We should not discount the influence of writers such as Famin in creating this pervasive image of priapic cult; it is more common to find images of an 'orgiastic' nature in eighteenth and nineteenth century prints. It is likely that one of the main Roman sources for these descriptions is the *Satyricon* of Petronius in which the protagonist manages repeatedly to offend Priapus, or members of his cult at least, and in one scene is punished along with his companions in a very explicit orgy. A strict secrecy to the cult is implied by one of the *Satyricon's* characters, Quartilla, who appears to be a priestess or devotee of Priapus, when she says:

I am afraid that youthful indiscretion will lead you to publish  
abroad what you saw in the chapel of Priapus and reveal our god's  
counsels to the mob.<sup>180</sup>

She goes on to have the companions tied up and plied with aphrodisiac, and insists it is the duty of the unwilling participants 'to devote the whole wakeful night to the genius of Priapus'.<sup>181</sup> The action in this scene does largely correspond to the ways in which many modern scholars describe the worship of Priapus, but we should remember that the *Satyricon* is a work full of exaggeration and word play as well as being primarily a humorous work. Therefore it should not be taken alone as proof of the nature of priapic cult and ritual; written in the first century CE under Nero, it is a complex work full of reference to its cultural context.<sup>182</sup> We will examine the implications and difficulties of the portrayal of Priapus in the *Satyricon* further in Chapters Two and Three where the humour will be relevant in our consideration of Priapus as a laughable character. The orgy scene is led by an individual as a punishment, does not give any indication of a community of worshippers and it is clearly intended to be humorous, establishing the primary characters as powerless.

The descriptions of a cult dedicated to Priapus in the *Satyricon* do not correspond to any of the Roman images we have. It is, therefore, not possible to say if there was a sexual element to any worship of Priapus that may have taken place in the Roman world.<sup>183</sup> We can see elements of the erotic in some of the depictions that feature Priapus but taken in the context of the Roman desire to

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<sup>179</sup> Johns 1982; Grant 1975.

<sup>180</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 17. Trans. Heseltine 1969.

<sup>181</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 20-27. Trans. Heseltine 1969.

<sup>182</sup> See Vout 2009: 101-113 on the relationship between the *Satyricon* and Neronian culture.

<sup>183</sup> Occasionally other writers, such as Juvenal in *Satire* 6, do describe sexual activity in relation to Priapus but, as we will see in Chapter Two, the main purpose of such texts seems to be to laugh at 'others', especially women.

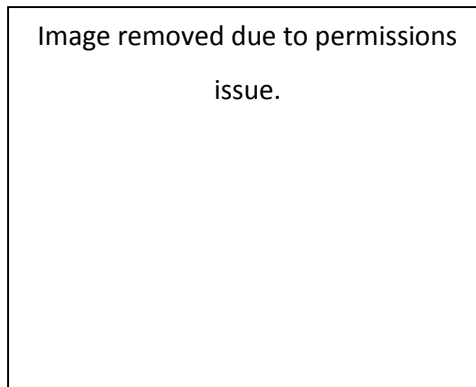
paint pictures of a mythical idyll these scenes seem to feature a Bacchic wonderland rather than cult practices. In Chapters Three and Four we will look at erotic images in context to understand their specific relevance in Roman culture. It seems that most modern accounts of 'obscurity' in the name of Priapus originate in a story that is most probably a very clever joke and a reflection of the tastes of sophisticated urbanites rather than the depravity of ancient worshippers, and emphasised by eighteenth century publications like those of Famin.

The scenes that appear to show a cult of Priapus are problematic. If the images and literature do reflect religious practice we have no way to know how popular or widespread this was. As there is no strong evidence to support the idea that there was identifiable religious practice either in the ancient rural past or the first centuries BCE and CE, there seems little to be gained from pursuing the scant evidence to draw conclusions about the specific nature of cult or ritual.<sup>184</sup> We find these images of a 'rural cult' depicted on luxury items found in urban areas. It seems unlikely that the owner of a highly decorative gem or wall painting in Pompeii would be actively participating in cults in the countryside around a crude wooden statue; rather they seem to want to evoke the rusticity and piety of such an occasion in their urban lives. All of the images of Priapus, as well as the literature, are products of the sophisticated urban culture of the late republic and imperial periods and this is how we should consider them; as artistic products of a people defining themselves through images of a rustic idyll and often an idyll linked to a mythological past. Of course, to suggest that the images of cult in text and image may have been more of a figment of creative, urban imaginations than rustic reality is not to imply that images were devoid of any sacred connotations.<sup>185</sup> The association with fertility suggests he was identified with religious powers whether people made offerings to him in thanks for them or not and Chapter Two will look at the apotropaic power of images. However, we need to deal with the visual fantasy created by the Romans of the late republic and early imperial period (and those who have studied him via these fantasies in the modern period) in order truly to understand the importance of the image of Priapus in Roman art and his importance to the individual patrons who chose to use his image to represent themselves.

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<sup>184</sup> There are some inscriptions that suggest individual dedications to Priapus but they are not related to the visual imagery explored here and do not provide any clear evidence for religion dedicated to Priapus. According to Boyce 1937: 72, in House VII.15.3 at Pompeii there was a small shrine with a Priapus statuette which may signal some form of worship but it is very difficult to extrapolate from this what that might have been in practice.

<sup>185</sup> There is a vast body of work on Roman religion but the most relevant here are those that emphasise the fluidity of religion, especially in the domestic sphere where it is difficult to divorce decorative motifs from sacred emblems. Scheid 2003, Henig 1984b and Kaufmann-Heinimann 2011 all discuss this.



**Figure 23:** Statue of Priapus.  
Imperial. Boston, Museum of Fine  
Arts.  
Photo:  
<http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/statue-of-priapus-151204> [accessed 15/04/18].

### The Creation of the Rustic Image

We have already seen that the Romans specifically created cultic contexts for images of Priapus to evoke an idea of a world devoted to piety and simplicity; they also created images of Priapus to represent concepts of the past and morality. Many of the images of Priapus with archaized traits fit into this contemporary appreciation of a rustic past. Many *anasyrma* figures of Priapus are dressed in a way that recalls the past; they usually wear long, heavy chitons, head cloths and fur boots as well as having heavy beards and curling hair. All of these features can be clearly seen in a marble statue from the first century CE (Figure 23).<sup>186</sup> Combined in a figure that already bears fruits and a large phallus as a reminder of agriculture and fertility the traits would clearly indicate the importance of the rural past. Zanker proposes that the connotation of the archaic style was often sacred and linked to *pietas* but for aesthetic reasons it was usually combined with classical elements.<sup>187</sup> This combination can be seen in many images of Priapus.

It is often stated as fact that there were many followers of Priapus and many statues littering the Roman countryside.<sup>188</sup> This is primarily based on the literary tradition in which Priapus is clearly defined as an object often crudely carved of wood and images in which Priapus is depicted as wooden, or even as part of a tree. In one of the poems of the *Priapea* in the *Virgilian Appendix* Priapus defines himself as having been 'fashioned by rustic art from a poplar tree' and, similarly in another by Horace, 'Once I was the trunk of a wild fig tree, a lump of useless wood, when the

<sup>186</sup> Megow 2009: 1035.

<sup>187</sup> Zanker 1988: 244.

<sup>188</sup> Based on references to Priapus in ancient literature Payne Knight 1876: 219 described Priapus statues as made with figwood; Littlewood 1968: 162 says the statues would have been made of apple wood.

craftsman wondering whether to make a bench or a Priapus preferred me to be a god.<sup>189</sup> Many have explained the lack of archaeological evidence for the cult of Priapus as the result of the poor survival of wooden objects.<sup>190</sup> It is not possible definitively to say this was not the case and that there were never any wooden statues of Priapus, but we should be cautious. The presentation of Priapus as wooden in poetry is most likely a motif employed to enhance the crudeness of his image and to associate him with a poetic landscape. It is also impossible to suggest any widespread interest in Priapus outside of urban centres from the depictions and literary references: they are not written by men living in the countryside but are written in Rome and, although they use rural motifs, actual locations are not defined as we would expect from poems that reflect a timeless 'other world'.

A use of wooden statues as a motif to suggest antiquity can be seen in other Roman literature; most notably Virgil in the *Aeneid* in depicting the pious Latins describes 'statues depicting their forebears of old, carved from ancient cedar-wood.'<sup>191</sup> This not only associates wooden statues with the ancient Latins but goes even further in suggesting that it was their oldest family deities who were depicted in such a way. Similarly the Italic god Vertumnus, who is also associated with the rustic world, is described by Propertius in a poem as being wooden: 'A maple stump was I, rough-hewn by hasty sickle'.<sup>192</sup> When viewed in the context of other literature and the desire to create an idyllic past we can see that wooden statues were a highly effective way of implying the rustic nature of a deity and we can see this reflected in the way more recent scholarship also uses descriptions of Priapus' wooden statues as evidence that he was an ancient rustic god of fertility. It is also notable that making Priapus wooden in both art and literature also designates him as man-made which has implications for the interpretation of his image and we will return to this throughout the thesis.

The value of piety in particular was often exemplified in images of Priapus that depict him at the centre of worship, for example, in the imperial gem that shows two women making offerings and a man playing the flute to a Priapus herm in a tree (Figure 19). This kind of image is repeated over and over again on small luxury items such as gems and clearly relates the image of Priapus to simple cults and a reverence for the gods, but does so through a mass manufactured and urbane object that reflects the sophistication brought by the expansion of empire. Priapus' image reflects this in his

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<sup>189</sup> App. Virg. 2. 1-2; Hor. Sat. 8. 1-3. The fig tree was particularly associated with fertility.

<sup>190</sup> Johns 1982: 52 describes the appearance of the statues as simple and herm-like although she acknowledges they do not survive. Dorsey 1992: 19 also states wooden cult statues of Priapus existed but do not survive.

<sup>191</sup> Virg. Aen. 7.179-80

<sup>192</sup> Prop. 4. 2. 59. Also see Suits 1961 for a discussion on this poem.





**Figure 24:** Glass gemstone showing a Priapus herm and a man milking a goat. 1st - 3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=397532&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=397532&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2) [accessed 20/02/17].

coarse appearance in rural scenes that are neatly constructed by skilled craftsmen, probably of Greek origin or familiar with Hellenistic art, in a metropolis.

## Rural Life

Many images of Priapus serve to emphasise his connection to rural simplicity by depicting him with scenes that relate to the importance of fertility for peasants. For example, an imperial era gem shows a statue of Priapus alongside a peasant milking a goat (Figure 24). This simple activity invokes images of the simplicity of rural life and the sustenance found through basic *pietas*. This gem reflects larger images of similar scenes such as those on the Vatican base in which a goat is also milked, or even the Amiternum Couch which shows the harvest. In the depiction of activities such as this and literature that idealises rustic lifestyles we see the past and present become entwined and indistinguishable from one another. For those urban patrons who carried gems depicting such scenes this was far from their lived reality.<sup>193</sup> That is not to say that city dwelling Romans did not have any connection to rural life. To some extent the demarcation of the countryside as a completely separate entity from the city was a rhetorical construction too. As J. A. North has shown, the city was not completely isolated from the countryside and the ways of rural life. Not least because at any time a proportion of city inhabitants must have emigrated from the countryside and as the city was the hub of religious life many would have travelled regularly for festivals.<sup>194</sup> The country was also incredibly important to the elites of the urban centres as their rural villas provided the wealth that allowed them to partake in Roman culture and created a space for the display of

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<sup>193</sup> Wilkins 2003: 369 emphasises that such imagery idealises the countryside with no recognition of the relentless work needed to sustain a family.

<sup>194</sup> North 1995: 139-140.

elite refinements. Yet we see time and again the rhetoric treat the town and city as completely distinct, one representing luxury and lax morals, the other symbolising the *pietas* and simplicity that has marked Roman civilisation from its founding.<sup>195</sup>

The rejection of the city in favour of a life of simplicity is a prevalent theme in elegiac poetry, and much of the art in which we see Priapus was a significant part of the discourse of the late first century BCE. As we have seen, in the Augustan era peace and prosperity were heavily promoted as ideals and motifs that evoke tranquillity and abundance were common in both public and private art. Priapus is not the recipient of state worship, although the more general interest in peace and return to a 'golden age' of religious piety seems to have played a significant part in the use of his image. We can understand much of this through examining some of the elegiac poetry of the time, particularly that of Propertius and Tibullus. These writers were active in the second half of the first century BCE and are famous for their apparent rejection of urban society for mistresses and rural solitude. Both writers use love and relationships as a way to emphasise their ideas about their place within society and often they are, at least when taken at face value, happy to withdraw from the competitive life and luxury of society in the city in favour of a quiet life of love in the countryside.<sup>196</sup>

There is a strong body of work that examines the meanings and motives behind Augustan elegy and it is still open to much interpretation but it does seem clear that the poems are a highly complex series of discourses about Roman society framed through an apparent rejection of urban social constructs.<sup>197</sup> Significantly, the elegiac poets 'play with tradition in order to be original' as Welch has said, and it is this use of traditional values to interrogate contemporary society that mirror the ways in which Priapus' image is used.<sup>198</sup> The elegists deal in playfulness, allusion and double meanings; this adds to their relevance as contextual aids for images of Priapus as they reflect the ambiguities that often accompany the crude image in the sophisticated art work.<sup>199</sup> That is to say that the games the poets play are reflected in the actual images themselves, suggesting that recent approaches to the elegy might help us approach images of Priapus. We know that Roman poets played a significant

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<sup>195</sup> Winsor Leach 1980: 62 suggests that some poets deliberately evoke the idea of rustic piety and simplicity in their poems to protect themselves from accusations of self-indulgence and to show they subscribe to Roman ideals.

<sup>196</sup> It is notable that many scholars place this world outside of reality; for example, Frederick 2012: 427 and Veyne 1988: 101. Later in this chapter we will discuss more fully the ways in which priapic images are also associated with a timeless world.

<sup>197</sup> Valladares 2012: 321.

<sup>198</sup> Welch 2012a: 12.

<sup>199</sup> Veyne 1988: 104 says that elegy 'finds pleasure in jeering at social conventions, defying the rules and inverting values'.

part in presenting Priapus as a simple fertility god and elegy provides some useful context to explain the popularity of Priapus as an artistic motif for fertility. In Tibullus he is introduced in the opening poem of Book One:

Upon the temple threshold, golden Ceres, may  
my farm-grown corn husk crown be hung for you  
and red Priapus be on guard in fruitful gardens  
so his vicious scythe may scare off birds.  
You, Lares, also take in gifts as guardians  
of threadbare land that once was prosperous.<sup>200</sup>

Here Priapus is included in a list of deities with the hope that they will all make the land fertile and the farm prosperous. The first half of this poem is entirely devoted to the notion of rejecting great wealth in favour of humble but fertile small holding. The realities of poor harvests and hard toil play no part in many of the fantasies of elegy and Priapus symbolises protection from such problems by promising fertility.<sup>201</sup> However, he also grounds the fantasies of the elegists in both Greek and Roman traditions. The imagery of Priapus and the 'fruitful' garden in this poem mirrors the depictions of Priapus in an *anasyrma* pose where he carries bundles of fruit (Figure 6) or the pillar on which a painted Priapus stands watch over a small garden (Figure 3).

To the Romans rustic simplicity and fertility were exemplified in agricultural self-sufficiency. The writing of Varro glorifies this concept. His treatise *On Agriculture* is dedicated to examining all aspects of farming, providing detailed discussions of best practice. Interwoven with this discussion is the idea that agriculture is the backbone of Roman life and a clear link to the earliest history of the Roman people. He says that 'not only is the tilling of the fields more ancient [than the cities] – it is more noble.'<sup>202</sup> Further to this he accuses the heads of families of 'sneaking' within city walls and 'abandoning the sickle and plough.'<sup>203</sup> The association between humbly working the land (he does allow for a body of slaves actually to carry out the work, so we should be aware he is not suggesting contemporary Romans take to subsistence farming), Roman virtues and history are all threaded together throughout the treatise. This was part of the renewed interest in what were considered agrarian rites and cults particularly on the public stage. Galinsky puts this phenomenon succinctly

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<sup>200</sup> Tib. 1.1.15-20. Trans. Juster 2012.

<sup>201</sup> Zanker 2012: 150-151 & 289 notes that in Roman landscapes the peasants are well nourished and prosperous.

<sup>202</sup> Varro. *Rust.* 3.1.4.

<sup>203</sup> Varro. *Rust.* 2.1.3.



**Figure 25:** A marble relief showing Priapus in a landscape. 1st century CE. London. British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=460021&partId=1&searchText=roman+marble+urn&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=460021&partId=1&searchText=roman+marble+urn&page=1)  
[accessed 28/04/18].

when he says; ‘One of the central Augustan preoccupations, which had ample republican precedent, was the maintenance of traditional values of an agricultural society in the midst of a time of intellectual and material sophistication.’<sup>204</sup> He also emphasises the fact that this interest in the past does not belong only to the Augustan era; as we have previously noted, images of Priapus became increasingly popular from the late republican period onward and therefore mirror the development of the interest in rustic cults.

Varro begins *On Agriculture* with an extensive list of ancient agricultural deities and returns to their importance throughout the work.<sup>205</sup> Often the ways in which traditional values were explored, through art and literature, only serve to emphasise how far removed from an agricultural past elite urban Romans had become. Many of the images of Priapus that emphasise *pietas* and self-sufficiency depict him as the centre of a rural cult or as a feature of peasant life, emphasising his nature as a fertility deity and firmly establishing him as part of the rural past constructed in the first century BCE. The Amiternum Couch encapsulates the spirit of the ideal rural life; it features a productive and fertile harvest but one filled with merriment and joy.

### A Timeless Part of the Landscape

A marble plaque in the British Museum features a typical herm of Priapus on a natural rock pedestal in a small landscape featuring birds walking around and an urn on a pedestal (Figure 25). Aside from the urn this image shows no sign of human life or intervention and one could believe that the herm had always been part of this landscape, particularly since he seems to have grown from the rocks.

<sup>204</sup> Galinsky 1996: 293.

<sup>205</sup> Varro. *Rust.* 1.1.3.



**Figure 26:** Fresco from the House of the Lovers in Pompeii (I.10.11). Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: Jashemski

<https://www.pompeiiinpictures.com/pompeiiinpictures>

There are suggestions that this has, at some point, been an inhabited area but the urn, through its association with death, Priapus with his archaic appearance and the unkempt foliage all lend an air of timelessness to the scene. In both literature and image Priapus is frequently depicted as an unchanging part of the landscape and suggests an age that exists outside of time. His status as a permanent part of the landscape is emphasised in the way he is depicted as a herm. This stationary form implies longevity and a god who does not move around but is a feature lasting generations.

Often this is further enhanced by the base for his statue, rocks are common, giving the impression he has been hewn from the earth itself. We also see this in a painting from the House of the Lovers at Pompeii (I.10.11).<sup>206</sup> It is a typical Roman landscape scene with a crumbling building, possibly a temple and some wild looking plant life including a gnarled tree (Figure 26). The Priapus is here shown on top of a large rock formation which suggests a permanent home for the figure. The overall effect of this painting is, once again, timelessness. Nothing indicates a particular event or activity and the time frame is indistinguishable. Similar effects can be seen in the gems in which he sits on top of a spring (Figure 48) or the way he is positioned trees so that he seems to grow out of them, particularly when read in conjunction with the poetry that details his creation from various types of tree.<sup>207</sup> The relation to the landscape is defined through the emphatic use of permanent features such as rock and trees. The fact that these landscapes are so devoid of a specific time and places

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<sup>206</sup> Jashemski 1993: 131.

<sup>207</sup> Herter 1932: 5 described Priapus as often being made from an existing branch that happened to be split in two. Hunt 2011 has argued that Priapus could be a living tree which seems to take the literary descriptions too far; however, he is clearly associated with the primeval aspects of the landscape through trees, as well as being characterised as rustic because it is an inexpensive material.

means that origins of Priapus as a cult deity are irrelevant and Priapus' image can be incorporated into these landscapes unproblematically to represent a Roman interest in timeless landscapes.

The landscapes that contain Priapus are always ambiguous and difficult to distinguish geographically and temporally; it seems that in them history and myth can be combined into a world where fertility and abundance are apparent. This is most apparent in scenes that depict Bacchus or his *thiasos* with Priapus like the silver Vicarello Goblet in Cleveland which shows Priapus sprinkling his phallus surrounded by Bacchic paraphernalia and figures in a Hellenistic style (Figure 54).<sup>208</sup> Here we see a highly polished manifestation of a rustic world which to the Romans is designed to evoke a feeling of the past but because of the use of existing Hellenistic visual language there is also a mythological element that sets the scene outside of temporality. Essentially the world of Bacchus exists beyond the lived past and present but remains relevant because of its setting in a familiar rustic environment.

Priapus features heavily in such scenes and is inextricably linked to them in several ways. As a clear symbol of rustic fertility and piety, Priapus is a key marker for this other world and we should consider images of Priapus with rustic outdoor scenery, such as a base of rocks or tree branches as indicative of a mythical-historical landscape. As the mythological son of Bacchus and Venus, Priapus is an obvious element of this terrain in which he links the world of the gods to the actual human worship of them.<sup>209</sup>

Priapus' ability to bring about fecundity and prosperity makes him an appropriate deity in a world of peace and harmony.<sup>210</sup> The roles of Venus, Bacchus and Priapus were often interwoven and all three could influence fertility in a variety of ways. They are invoked simultaneously on a late republican wine vessel found at Pompeii with a head of Priapus on the handle and the inscription: 'Offer me pure wine so may Venus who protects the gardens love you'.<sup>211</sup> Here we see Venus as protector of vegetation associated with wine, the province of Bacchus, and Priapus associated with the wine as

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<sup>208</sup> Kaufmann-Heinimann 2011: 192 discusses some of the typical elements of Bacchic imagery such as herms and masks and how they are used by the Romans to evoke Hellenistic sanctuaries. Often these motifs relate to attempts to depict sacred rural landscapes of an undefined past, this will be explored in Chapter Four.

<sup>209</sup> For myths concerning Priapus' parentage see Diod. Sic. 4.6.1; Paus. 9.31.2.

<sup>210</sup> Bacchus in particular is also related to notions of happiness and harmony in the Roman world. See Castriota 1995 and Zanker and Ewald 2012 for further details.

<sup>211</sup> *CIL* IV 2776; Discussed by Eden 1963: 29-10.

an image.<sup>212</sup> The three deities of this mythological family complemented each other in imagery as representations of the same ideal of prosperity and abundance. The correlation between the three divinities in imagery seems to predate the relationship in myth and it is possible the ancestry was created not only to establish a strong bond from a fertility perspective but also as part of the aspiration to attribute a long and, particularly, Roman past to Priapus.

These examples suggest that the Romans were not particularly concerned with accurately documenting the origins of Priapus in the first centuries BCE and CE but rather used Priapus, and the connotations of fertility and rusticity that his image conjured, to explore their own contemporary world and begin to define their place within it. Significantly, the Greek origins of Priapus remain manifest in the visual language used to depict him but he is now used to denote a timeless mythical world in which he and his associates, including his parents, represent the happiness that comes about through fertility.

It is worth observing that Roman discourse about the past, which as we have seen was largely a mythical construct, has been repeatedly used by scholars to justify presumptions and support theories about that past, as we have seen earlier in this chapter. This means that scholars relying on Roman texts to examine early Roman religion encounter the problem of relying upon later writers, who are trying to create the impression of a long history of rustic and primitive cults for Roman culture. When Johns states 'statues of him [Priapus], often crudely carved in wood, were...a common feature of the countryside,' for example, she is drawing on the imagery created in the sophisticated, urban poetry of the *Priapea*.<sup>213</sup> Similarly, when she states that Priapus was an 'early fertility god' and that 'male deities who were concerned with fertility were of early and obscure origin, and even the writers of antiquity were forced to be vague and contradictory about them' these tropes come from a Priapus created by first century BCE and CE Romans in their art and literature.<sup>214</sup> As we have seen, the origins for Priapus do not seem to have been particularly 'early' or 'vague' but Roman artists and writers certainly set about creating the impression that they were. This buys into and reproduces as fact the 'invention of tradition', of the Romans of the late republic and early imperial era.<sup>215</sup> Significantly, Hobsbawm and Ranger suggest that 'we should expect it [the invention of tradition] to occur more frequently when a rapid transformation of society weakens or

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<sup>212</sup> Venus as a protector of gardens is a specifically Roman attribute. Eden 1963 covers this subject in some depth.

<sup>213</sup> Johns 1982: 50.

<sup>214</sup> Johns 1982: 42.

<sup>215</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983; see also Dench 2005.

destroys the social patterns.’<sup>216</sup> This resonates with the changes to Roman society after imperial expansion, Greek influence and changes in leadership which created a new social make up.

## Conclusion

We can see through these examples that the image of Priapus is found in many contexts that suggest he was visually associated with concepts of fertility and abundance and it is clear he is associated with fecundity in his visual imagery. This is true from the earliest images we have of him but gained particular emphasis in the imperial period. Although these images do not provide direct evidence of the worship of Priapus in organised cult they do show that his image was enough to evoke in the mind of the viewer connotations of prosperity and a rustic idol. It should be stressed, however, that in the Roman world the appearance of rusticity does not necessarily indicate a genuine rustic origin for a cult and our evidence is firmly urban in context and nature.

Both ancient and modern writers clearly associate the image of Priapus with ideas of fertility and prosperity. We have seen Tibullus include him in an invocation of rustic deities asking that he protect the gardens and we have seen many modern scholars, like Dulaure, argue that he was a symbol of ‘fecundity’ and that phallic worship is the most ancient form of fertility cult. In image too, Priapus is clearly a representation of fertility through his association with fruits, vines and his prominent ithyphallus. All of these examples, however, have also indicated that interpreting Priapus’ image is by no means a simple task as one must contend not only with the Roman context and the ways in which Romans manipulated his image to suit their purpose but also the cultural baggage of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries which has left a legacy in scholarship about Priapus.

Many of the early scholars to look at Priapus were heavily focused on finding a prehistoric origin for him but this quest was inevitably influenced by the changes in their own societies. Eighteenth and early nineteenth century scholars wished to find purity in the original worship of Priapus that was linked solely to fertility, not the later, highly sexual rites they thought existed under the Romans. Still, many were drawn to the erotic aspects of Priapus’ image and outside of mainstream scholarship we find his image used in a variety of contemporary media. As the nineteenth century progressed, a strong sense of morality led to Priapus becoming a token for all that Christianity denounced in pagan societies. However, towards the end of the century evolutionism began to provide a new context for the interpretation of Priapus’ images; ‘primitivism’. This approach put forward the notion that all peoples would have once worshipped fertility deities before progressing

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<sup>216</sup> Hobsbawm and Ranger 1983: 4.



to 'civilisation'. Despite changes in views about the origins of fertility cult, the desire to find an early origin for Priapus still lingers. Although clearly bound in cultural issues from their eras, these scholars have had a lasting influence on the interpretations of Priapus' image and the language used to describe him, in fact, most work still discusses an active Roman cult.

As Priapus in most scholarship is heavily judged by contemporary values it is necessary to return to the Roman images to understand his image in the most relevant context; that of the first century BCE and the early years of the emperors when his image became increasingly popular. We have seen many scholars base their interpretations of Priapus' image on a limited number of Roman sources from this period which present an image of Priapus as part of a rustic cult and the fertility motifs that accompany his image often complement this. It is impossible to say whether there was such a cult of Priapus in the Roman countryside, however, it is clear that the images and literature that create this impression very much belonged to a sophisticated urban culture and are part of a clever illusion of rusticity rather than an actual depiction of it.

Using fertility and its links to the country life of the peasant farmer this chapter has begun to unravel some of the rhetoric around Priapus. In the changing landscape of late republican and early imperial culture Priapus was used to reflect a growing interest in the past and the ideals of rustic simplicity associated with it. The illusion is a complex one incorporating mythology, traditional values and the actual past into a world in which contemporary tensions regarding foreign influence, luxury and urbanity can all be played out through a series of, Greek-influenced, intellectual artistic endeavours. In essence the rustic world created both combined and questioned everything that made the Romans 'Roman' and Priapus' image was at the heart of it. As a crudely carved symbol of fertility on the face of it Priapus was as distant from sophisticated urban culture as possible and it is this essence that made him so apt as a symbol of this pseudo-historical rustic world.

## Chapter Two: Protection and Humour

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**Figure 27:** Priapus fresco from the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1).

Photo:  
[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus\\_Fresco.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus_Fresco.jpg)  
[accessed 15/04/18].

Perhaps the most infamous depiction of Priapus is a painting from the vestibule of the House of the Vettii in Pompeii (VI.15.1). This fresco shows an anthropomorphic Priapus weighing his large phallus on a set of scales counterbalanced with a money bag (Figure 27). The image has many of the common iconographic features we have identified in Chapter One; it is set outside with rocks providing the backdrop, Priapus wears a chiton which he holds up to reveal his phallus, he is shown bearded and rustic looking, and a basket of fruit is prominently placed next to his feet.

This image has influenced many interpretations of the decorative programme of the House of the Vettii but the dialogue around the image itself largely falls into two areas, both of which will be the focus of this chapter: apotropaism and humour. Through these two themes, this chapter will explore the power of images of Priapus. Power that, like so many of Priapus' traits, is ambiguous in its nature; it can protect, mock, and both include and exclude individuals from parts of society. Many scholars have used this image of Priapus to suggest that the inhabitants of House of the Vettii were

crude, tasteless and superstitious people but it is in fact a highly sophisticated composition.<sup>217</sup> As a representation of fortune, Priapus' image is highly nuanced and intelligently rendered. Furthermore, although this Priapus is depicted in a timeless setting, his image is a reflection of many contemporary concerns that range from basic protection of the family through to anxieties about identity and masculinity. This particular image shows great erudition in its understanding of the attributes of Priapus and their significance. The fruit symbolises fertility, the *thyrsus* underscores the connection to Bacchus, the garb emphasises the ambiguity of Priapus' origins, the setting displays the connection to age-old rusticity and, most significantly, for this discussion, the phallus not only symbolises fertility and masculinity but it also provides a protective force for the patron, his property and his visitors. It is to these supernatural powers that we will first turn our attention.

## Apotropaism

Although apotropaism may today seem superstitious and irrational, it was an important part of Roman life and is particularly prevalent in visual culture. The image of Priapus from the doorway of the House of the Vettii helps us to begin to explore how Priapus' apotropaic power worked and how his attributes and visual identity played a part in this. For example, we can see that the phallus was very significant as it is the dominant feature of the image and it is further emphasised through the motif of the scales and money bags.

For clarity, I will briefly explore what I understand to be apotropaism in the Roman world and where it may be relevant to this study of the image of Priapus. The most basic definition of apotropaism is the use of symbols to protect people or property, 'Apotropaia' comes from the Greek *apotrepein* which means to avert or distract. For the Romans apotropaism most often applied specifically to protection from the evil eye or *invidia* (envy), but I will also include the protection of individuals in a variety of other dangerous situations. The evil eye was considered a potent force and it was a commonly held belief that people who were envious of another's possessions or appearance could literally emanate harmful particles from their eyes, these particles were also unpredictable and some believed that those with envious thoughts could accidentally injure their own families and friends as well as their intended targets.<sup>218</sup> Plutarch, a Greek writing at the turn of the second century CE, explains; 'Envy .....naturally penetrates the soul and fills the body up with evil.....So when

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<sup>217</sup> For example Clarke 1991; see Hales 2009 for a discussion of how interpretations of the decorative scheme have been based on notions of class and taste.

<sup>218</sup> Bartsch 2006 introduces the theories behind looking and the evil eye in detail.

people consumed by envy rest their eyes on persons, and these eyes, being situated adjacently to the soul, draw evil from it and attack the persons as if with bewitched missiles.<sup>219</sup> Pliny the Elder, who also wrote in the first century CE, even refers to whole families in Africa under whose gaze ‘meadows perish, trees dry up and children die.’<sup>220</sup> As an antidote to the pervasive threat of the evil eye, it was necessary to establish a range of protective images around both individuals and dangerous spaces. Images of the human body, especially those showing genitals or unusual features, were commonly used to repel the evil eye and the protective image *par excellence* was the erect phallus, or *fascinum*.

The *fascinum* could be a standalone apotropaic symbol providing a simple form that could be drawn, modelled or inscribed anywhere to protect a person or property.<sup>221</sup> Perhaps the most famous example of this is from Pompeii, a plaque depicting a large phallus that decorated the wall outside a bakery (Figure 28). The physical dangers of a bakery are readily apparent; with fire and injury a great risk and perhaps, on top of this, concern about business finances. In addition to the phallus, this plaque also carries the caption ‘hic habitat felicitas’ which has been interpreted in various ways but it is most commonly taken to mean ‘here lives good fortune’ this firmly links the image of the phallus with the prosperity of the owner. It may also have been intended to reassure those entering that they were well protected within the building and may even acquire some of the good fortune for themselves. A small terracotta found in Turkey and now in the British Museum even more explicitly associates the phallus and the evil eye (Figure 29). At just over 11 centimetres long (so this may have been a portable object or have been placed in a significant location in a home or business) it shows two phalli working together to wield a large two handled saw against a representation of the evil eye. Clearly the phalli are prevailing over the eye which lies on the ground beneath the saw. This seems to unequivocally say that the evil eye can be defeated by the phallus.

These phallic images, which show that the *fascinum* was an important apotropaic symbol, provide us with a context through which to consider those images of Priapus that seem to have had a protective function. The formidable phallus appears to be the main characteristic of images of Priapus that endowed them with an apotropaic function. Where objects are found in situ, we see a

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<sup>219</sup> Plut. *Mor.* 7. 42.

<sup>220</sup> Plin. *HN.* 7.16-8: this also raises the issue of race in relation to apotropaism, we will come to this later in the chapter.

<sup>221</sup> Moser 2006. For specific examples; Johns and Wise 2003 discuss a small gold phallic pendant; Plouviez 2005 discusses phallic ornaments and Corbishley 1984 looks at graffiti.



**Figure 28:** Wall plaque of a phallus from *insula* VI.6 at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: Sailko -

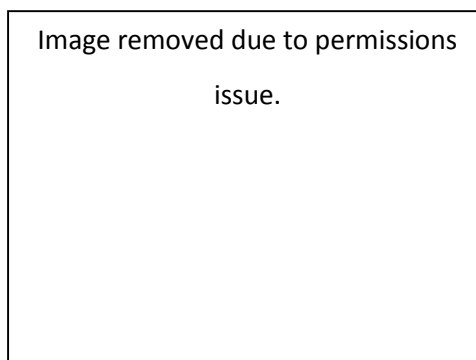
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=30949683> [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 29:** Terracotta statuette depicting the 'evil eye'. 1st-2nd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=464027&partId=1&searchText=phallus&page=5](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=464027&partId=1&searchText=phallus&page=5) [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 30: Wooden Priapus from the Plainer**  
A shipwreck. Marsilles, Roman Dock Museum.  
Photo: Neilson. 2002: 250.

strong connection between priapic images and dangerous situations, such as a wooden Priapus in an *anasyrma* pose that was found in a shipwreck off the coast of Marseille (Figure 30). Harry Neilson has suggested that the unfinished back points to it being from a shrine but many of the small Priapus figures found elsewhere also have unfinished backs so we should not rule it out as a personal amulet carried by someone on board or it could have been reused in a shrine after being designed for a different context.<sup>222</sup> The protection Priapus afforded sailors is well attested in poems from the *Palatine Anthology* so we can assume that there was a Greek tradition of Priapus' image as an apotropeion at sea and, although it is not a strong theme in the *Carmina Priapea*, this statuette suggests images could be used in a similar way in Roman contexts.<sup>223</sup> This is supported by a silver cup that shows fishing boats overlooked by a Priapus herm on the shore (Figure 31) and a mirror with erotes in a boat also overlooked by a Priapus herm (Figure 32). In the case of seafaring, images of Priapus may have offered a promise of prosperity and protection from the forces of nature rather than specific protection from the evil eye; although in the close quarters of a ship some may have felt the need to carry amulets to guard against envy.<sup>224</sup> Neilson also suggests that Priapus may have been used in sailing contexts as a marker on the coast that would warn sailors of dangers, such as hidden rocks, and help them to navigate safely into ports, which seems to be the case on the cup and mirror.<sup>225</sup>

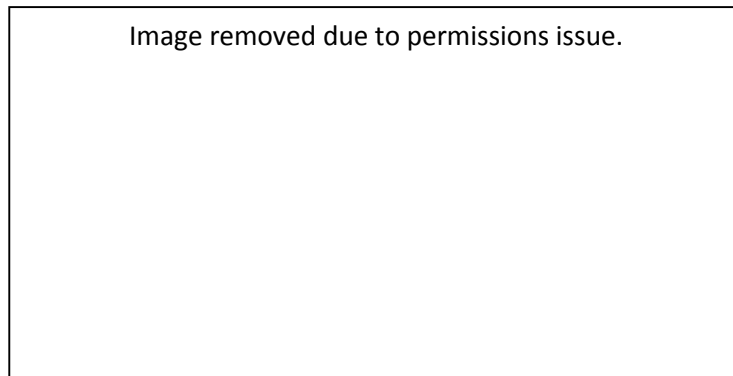
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<sup>222</sup> Neilson 2002: 251.

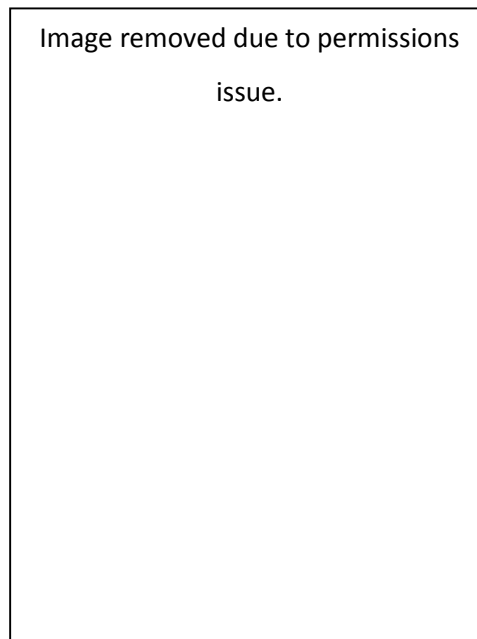
<sup>223</sup> The Palatine Anthology is a collection of Greek epigram by a variety of authors, it was compiled in the tenth century and may contain material from seventh century BCE until 600 CE (Livingstone and Nisbet 2010: 12-13). See O'Connor 1989 for a comprehensive account of priapic poems related to the sea.

<sup>224</sup> Neilson 2002: 252 says there have been at least three shipwrecks found with priapic imagery.

<sup>225</sup> Neilson 2002: 249.



**Figure 31:** Silver cup with fishing scene. 1st century BCE. Avenches, Roman Museum.  
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1033.



**Figure 32:** Silver mirror showing Priapus and erotes. 1st century CE. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Mattusch 2008: 118.



**Figure 33:** Amethyst gem showing Priapus. 1st - 3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=437429&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=437429&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1) [accessed 15/04/18].

If this is the case it further extends the protective remit of the images. It also put Priapus in the position of boundary marker, a figure sitting directly on the point at which land and coast meet and where territorial boundaries end, thus a liminal space and, as we shall see, Priapus' image was most often used to protect those in ambiguous spaces. If, in these situations, the image of Priapus was set upon a pile of rocks or wood to make him visible, as Neilson suggests, it may be that the shape of the marker from a distance may have appeared phallic too, further emphasising the visual power of these sacred markers.<sup>226</sup>

### Portable and Functional Objects

Often images of Priapus adorn items that are highly personal and portable such as carved gem stones and seals. In public spaces it is impossible to control one's visibility and susceptibility to the envy of others, therefore, to protect oneself it made sense to have an object that could be carried into such spaces. Daniel Ogden shows that portable amulets were the most 'pervasive of magical tools in antiquity' and it is unsurprising that many of these items display the characteristics typical of apotropaic objects.<sup>227</sup> These items frequently simply show Priapus alone with a particularly prominent phallus. Protective symbols worn on the person could be very basic but at the high end of

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<sup>226</sup> Neilson 2002: 249.

<sup>227</sup> Ogden 2002b: 261.



the social scale gems acted as amulets.<sup>228</sup> As well as the choice of figure, it is probable that the colour and material of the gem were also important in affording it magical powers.<sup>229</sup> For example, an engraved amethyst gem in the British Museum dated between the first and third century CE provides an example of the combination of a stone that is not only striking in colour but also said to have magical properties and a figure of Priapus (Figure 33). In this case Priapus is shown full-frontally, heavily draped but still exposing his phallus and herm-like legs. On his head he wears a wreath of leaves. The gem is only one centimetre wide and just short of one and a half centimetres long so it was potentially originally a piece of jewellery. Pliny the Elder tells us that amethyst could, amongst other things, prevent plagues of locust and save individuals from spells.<sup>230</sup> It seems all aspects of an amulet, including the design, the deity it invoked, the material and the colour, were important in boosting its apotropaic power.

Many of these personal items that featured Priapus as an apotropaic talisman are objects that both need protection and provide it, for example a ring used as a seal stone both protects documents and needs to be kept safe from thieves, and it could also provide protection for the individual wearing it if suitably decorated.<sup>231</sup> Objects such as these show the complexities at play in apotropaism and they can help us to understand how the power of Priapus' image was thought to act. One object that makes this link between function and decoration explicit is an iron key of the early imperial period found at a Roman villa (Figure 34). The key has three decorated sides at the top including one showing a Priapus herm in an *anasyrma* pose which is similar to his depiction on gems. The use of an image of Priapus on a key is particularly interesting as it ties the function of the item to that of the image; keys both protect belongings and need to be protected from theft.<sup>232</sup> The key also acts as a boundary, albeit a portable one, and, as we will see, images of Priapus frequently appear painted onto doorways or boundaries within the home and in other dangerous spaces. So the image of Priapus in this case enhances qualities the key already possesses whilst further protecting the key and the owner, who may have also used it as a portable apotropaion and kept it on their person or who may have used the key in a dangerous space such as a doorway.

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<sup>228</sup> For an example of a very crude amulet see Besques 1971: 82, plate 100e. It is basic glazed earth with a suspension lug and only 0.035 centimetres in height.

<sup>229</sup> Richter 1956: xx.

<sup>230</sup> Plin. *HN*. 37.40.

<sup>231</sup> Richter 1956: xvii states that a seal falling into the wrong hands could have serious consequences.

<sup>232</sup> See Megow 2009: 1035 for details of the key. The phenomenon of depicted deities on items they are conceptually linked to is found on a variety of objects, for example see Kaufmann-Henimann 2011 for details of money boxes decorated with Fortuna or Mercury.

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issue.

**Figure 34:** Bronze key found at an imperial era villa near MuttENZ. Aarburg, Heimatmuseum.  
Photo: LIMC: 1035.



**Figure 35:** Pottery Lamp showing Priapus. 2nd century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=433127&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=433127&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2) [accessed 15/04/18].

Lamps, in particular, represented both danger and protection in the Roman world, danger from fire and protection from the darkness. They were also personal objects that, like gems and small statues, were available in a wide variety of designs that allowed the patron to select images they felt were personally significant.<sup>233</sup> So it is unsurprising that we find Priapus depicted on them. A second century CE clay lamp is a good example of a herm of Priapus used in the centre of the lamp (Figure 35). In this profile view, the lower half of Priapus is a pillar while the top half is heavily draped but with a large phallus and testicles displayed. Even more striking are the lamps in which Priapus is not only a surface decoration but forms the body of the lamp with the protruding phallus providing the wick. Margherita Bolla has written about these lamps in detail and although she is unsure about the link between the grotesque nature of the figures and a protective function, it seems that the combination of typical characteristics of these lamps suggests that there was most likely an apotropaic element and that they are related to priapic imagery.<sup>234</sup> A first or second century BCE lamp from Italy shows many of these characteristics (Figure 36); it is a small bronze lamp in the form of a draped and bearded man with a spout for the wick in the position of the phallus, the head has a hole for pouring in the oil and the figure wears a hooded woollen mantle.<sup>235</sup> Bolla herself points to the strong link between light and the phallus in Roman mythology as they both represent fertility

<sup>233</sup> Kaufmann-Heinimann 2011: 197. Brendel 1970: 40 highlights that objects like this were often mass produced, however, he goes on to suggest that all Roman erotic images are of a low quality which is not evidenced, these lamps serve a practical purpose which explains their quality.

<sup>234</sup> Bolla 2010: 62-63 calls the link with protection too 'simplistic'.

<sup>235</sup> Although this item of clothing is unusual in many images of Priapus, would have been highly appropriate to his imagery as it was the garb of peasants and shepherds. As a deity representative of simple, rustic fertility it would be a suitable item of clothing for Priapus.



**Figure 36:** Bronze lamp. 1st - 2nd century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details/collection\\_image\\_gallery.aspx?assetId=799613001&objectId=431679&partId=1#more-views](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details/collection_image_gallery.aspx?assetId=799613001&objectId=431679&partId=1#more-views) [accessed 28/04/18].

and protection.<sup>236</sup> It seems, therefore, that these lamps provide an example of the decoration of an object both enhancing its function and mitigating any danger from the object itself or those that might use it.

Although images of Priapus clearly had an apotropaic role on these lamps it is worth noting that in literature Priapus, who is made of wood in most of the poems, is in fact susceptible to fire and seems to fear it. For example, in Martial's *Epigram* 8.40 Priapus is threatened with being thrown onto the fire if he does not protect the wood grove:

O Priapus, guardian, not of a garden, nor of a fruitful vine, but of  
this little grove, from which you were made and may be made  
again, I charge you, keep from it all thievish hands, and preserve  
the wood for its master's fire. If this should fall short, you will find  
that you yourself are but wood.<sup>237</sup>

Here the ambiguous nature of Priapus' power is made explicit; he clearly has the power to protect but is also defined as distinctly man-made for that purpose and is ultimately as vulnerable as those he protects. Perhaps, therefore, he is not only an apotropaion when depicted on lamps and other risk laden objects but also a witty reminder of danger and the potential consequences.

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<sup>236</sup> Bolla 2010: 63.

<sup>237</sup> Mart. *Epigrams* 8.40. Trans. Nisbet 2015.



**Figure 37:** Interior views of the *lupanare* at Pompeii (VII.12.18).  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 38:** Fresco of Priapus from the  
*lupanare* at Pompeii (VII.12.18).  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

## Liminal Spaces

Through the agency of amulets, images of Priapus could provide portable protection outside of the domestic sphere in a variety of settings but, occasionally, we find the images more permanently placed in some of the most dangerous locations frequented by urban men. The Priapus image from the *lupanare* at Pompeii (VII.12.18) is a clear example of Priapus' image being used in a specifically dangerous location and in a particularly exaggerated form. The brothel was dangerous for two reasons; firstly, because the Romans thought that one was particularly vulnerable whilst naked. This is borne out by attitudes to bathing which was another activity considered to be perilous.<sup>238</sup>

Secondly, the brothel was a site of potentially transgressive behaviour. Behind the doors of the individual rooms one could break a variety of societal taboos. It is no coincidence that the brothel is the site of many transgressions against Roman values in Latin literature such as those of the empress Messalina in Juvenal's accounts.<sup>239</sup>

The Priapus in the brothel at Pompeii is unusual in that he is depicted with two large phalli which he holds facing different directions (Figure 38). He is an anthropomorphic figure set in a landscape with a fig tree behind him.<sup>240</sup> The fresco itself was painted above the doors to the individual cubicles used by prostitutes and dates to sometime after 72 CE, based on the impression of a coin left in the plaster. Although it is a phallic image it is not a straightforward erotic scene, unlike the frescoes that surround it which depict sexual acts, and therefore it was most likely there to perform a protective function (Figure 37). The double phallus is also humorous, as it shows a very bizarre form of excess which fits well with the literary characterisation of Priapus as exaggerated in every sense. It may also have been humorous to those using the brothel as a joke about their own sexual prowess and virility, with Priapus' image representing a 'superman' when it comes to sex. On a more practical note, Antonio Varone has suggested that the depiction of the double phallus was primarily to ward off the evil eye regardless of the direction from which it came.<sup>241</sup>

More typically, we find Priapus, with only one phallus, depicted on the walls of domestic dwellings. Although we think of the home as being a 'safe' retreat, in the Roman world homes were fraught

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<sup>238</sup> Phallic and grotesque figures with similarities to Priapus are also frequently found in such circumstances. See Dunbabin 1989 for a summary of the dangers and Clarke 1996 for an example of one type of image common in baths with similarities to Priapus – ithyphallic Africans.

<sup>239</sup> Juv. 6:114-135 describes how the empress voluntarily worked in brothels at night.

<sup>240</sup> See Chapter One for the significance of fig trees as a fertility symbol.

<sup>241</sup> Varone 2000: 199.

with potential danger. They were the location of a variety of dangerous daily occurrences and events, such as the fire risk from cooking, the physical danger of childbirth and the envy of guests. They also acted as key spaces in which social relationships were formed during dinner parties and the *salutatio*; occasions that were vital in maintaining social status and carried the potential for guests with *invidia*. Therefore, it is perhaps not surprising that we find an abundance of apotropaic imagery in the domestic sphere.<sup>242</sup> Priapus is a common apotropaic image within the home but his image is most often found on or near doorways or other boundaries between one space and another. The painting from the House of the Vettii which comes from the vestibule is one such example whilst the image from House II.9.1 that we looked at in the first chapter is another, this time from the boundary between the *triclinium* and garden (Figure 3). There is perhaps a parallel to be found between these images and the many examples of carved panels depicting phalli found throughout the streets of Pompeii because they are also found at boundaries or transitional spaces. Whilst it may be that these images of Priapus provided a similar function by lifting their garments to expose the phallus, the way in which they did so exaggerated whatever magic was at play by adding the elements of the surprise and the grotesque.

The image from House II.9.1 is particularly interesting when considering the spaces in which we find priapic images as it reminds us that Priapus is often considered to be a god of the garden in literature which portrays him as protector of small horticultural spaces like cottage gardens or orchards. This literary trope also seems to be true of visual culture and a number of images of him have been found in or close to garden settings. The ambiguity of Priapus as a god of the rural world bound with displays of urbanity and sophistication makes him very appropriate for domestic gardens. Gardens too were very liminal places that straddled the boundary between rural and urban, as well as inside and outside and they were full of potentially dangerous artifice. Peristyle gardens, which we will explore in Chapter Four, were considered potentially dangerous spaces because they were not constrained by the same social order as the house and civic spaces.

As we have seen in Chapter One, Priapus' link to the garden and agriculture is often a construct used to emphasise rusticity; however, the use of his image in domestic gardens raises the possibility that his image did have a practical function in some horticultural settings. It seems that gardens were never exclusively decorative and there would not have been a strong distinction between decorative

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<sup>242</sup> von Stackelberg 2014: 298.



**Figure 39:** Marble Priapus fountain from the House of the Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1).

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

plants and edible plants in most spaces.<sup>243</sup> Therefore, where we do find images of Priapus in garden spaces they may have had a role to play in protecting the plants, as well as symbolising a bucolic fantasy.

It is likely that images of Priapus had a role in protecting the people in such spaces as much, if not more so, than the vegetation. Gardens were, and often still are today, immersive spaces that had a synaesthetic effect on the body.<sup>244</sup> They could be filled with strong smells from the flowers and plants, have images of the gods, or, in particular, the *thiasos* of Bacchus, scattered amongst the plants and the sound of running water could often be heard in the background. These elements could make one feel distant from the societal boundaries of the house and street and create danger, both through encouraging visitors to let down their guard and also by releasing emotion. This reflects Roman thoughts about wildernesses as uncivilised places beyond control.<sup>245</sup> As a small bit of the outside brought inside the domestic realm, the garden was an exciting place but also one of potential transgression and the presence of Bacchus and the *thiasos*, of which Priapus was often part, further reinforces this notion. The garden could be both a 'real' place and a mythic place

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<sup>243</sup> von Stackelberg 2009: 22.

<sup>244</sup> von Stackelberg 2009: 51.

<sup>245</sup> Winsor Leach 1988: 107.

simultaneously.<sup>246</sup> A statue of Priapus that acted as a fountain in the garden of the House of the Vettii provides a good example of an image that fully embraces the garden's various meanings (Figure 39).<sup>247</sup> This image fits well with the playful retinue of Bacchus and its use as a fountain calls to mind other members of the *thiasos* in gardens, such as the *silanoi* in the Villa of the Papyrus who ride wine skins spouting water; in this case Priapus spouts water from his phallus.<sup>248</sup> The fountain itself also added to the immersive elements providing the sound of running water and an unusual visual image of a god most often depicted in other worldly pastoral settings, on the boundary with wilderness.

On the other hand, Roman gardens also embody an element of control. They were spaces related to wilderness and rusticity but they were also highly cultivated and often include planting beds, artificial water features and carefully selected plants and decoration which, to some extent, makes them safe and civilised. The image of Priapus was a part of this urban design, simultaneously representing both the outdoor world and protection from it. Once again it is the ambiguity of Priapus' image that makes him so appropriate for the liminal space. The Vettii fountain exemplifies this as it is a high quality marble sculpture, so although its subject matter may appear wild and unrestrained both the craftsmanship and choice of material speak of ordered society and comfort. The fact that the only images we have of Priapus from these peristyle spaces are finely painted or carved in marble is part of the game of ambiguity and artificiality at play. From the literature we might expect crude, wooden scarecrow-like Priapus figures protecting a poor vegetable patch instead they are replaced by images that reflect the sophisticated urban environment. The joke is emphasised even further when archaising styles are used to render Priapus as this is yet another level of artificiality that serves to show the education and sophistication of the owner, we will see more of this humour later in this chapter.<sup>249</sup>

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<sup>246</sup> von Stackelberg 2014: 411.

<sup>247</sup> This statue is not displayed in the garden but the function and context suggest this would have been the original location.

<sup>248</sup> See Mattusch 2008: 92-93.

<sup>249</sup> It is not my intention to suggest that no garden ever had a wooden Priapus but as we do not have any evidence for them it is best to explore why they are high status items when we do find images of Priapus in gardens.





**Figure 40:** Glass Medusa cameo. 1st - 2nd Century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:

[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=433334&partId=1&searchText=medusa+cameo&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=433334&partId=1&searchText=medusa+cameo&page=1) [accessed 15/04/18].

It is possible to see ambiguity in all aspects of the peristyle garden which is very much reflected in the ambiguity of Priapus as a figure who protects the space, its plants and the patrons but who is also an aggressive and threatening figure. One is never sure if Priapus is there to protect or violently punish, or both. He also represents the dangerous Bacchic world where uncertainty and vague boundaries dominate. The peristyle itself, where we find these images, is an artificially constructed space which bears little resemblance to the natural world. As in Chapter One, where we explored Priapus as part of a cleverly fabricated rural past, we here see Priapus taking centre stage in Roman games that deliberately play on ambiguity and artificiality. Priapus embodies both of these concepts and we will return to the peristyle as an artificial landscape in Chapter Four.

### Frontality and Confrontation

Images of Priapus often share a distinct characteristic with other figures used as apotropaic symbols: confrontation. This usually comes in the form of a visual shock that is both dangerous and mesmerising. It is not only an attribute of Priapus, it is a trait also found in images of gorgons, theatre masks and some hermaphrodites. Often this confrontation highlights the strong ambiguity of the protective figures, which are powerful with the potential both to protect and harm. There is always an element of danger in harnessing the power of these images as they are impossible to avoid and they also frequently play on a degree of surprise which renders them unpredictable. Priapus' power seems to be primarily based in the aggression that he shows in his images and the confrontation takes the form of pre-emptive aggressive behaviour rather than defensive actions.

Like Priapus, Medusa was a popular form of apotropaic image based on a dangerous power, in her case the power of her gaze. Images of Medusa can only be approached frontally, usually being depicted as a two dimensional face that stares out of objects, making confrontation unavoidable.

This is obvious in an imperial gem from the British Museum where the whole space is taken up with Medusa's face and her stare, from very large eyes, is unavoidable (Figure 40). Jean-Pierre Vernant distilled the apotropaic characteristics of gorgon images into two; frontality and monstrosity.<sup>250</sup> Monstrosity does not have to be specifically terrifying but more generally it can be exaggerated, grotesque or animal-like features. Both of these characteristics can also be found in many images of Priapus. As well as conflict with the viewer who cannot avoid the directness of the image there is, according to Rainer Mack, also a conflict inherent in the image of Medusa itself between the power of the image and the material nature of the object.<sup>251</sup> Through creating a material, man-made image of the terrifying gorgon the viewer is able to conquer it by turning the gaze back onto it and ultimately by having control of it. Priapic poetry features similar conflicts between the power of Priapus' image and the ability of man to objectify it. As we have seen, he is reminded in poems that he is flammable; for example, he is reminded that he is also wooden and could be used in the hearth in one poem, and in another his statue is carried off by a thief.<sup>252</sup> Perhaps this enhances the power as apotropaion as the image becomes a 'secondary agent' of man allowing him to protect himself.<sup>253</sup> Priapus is often found on portable objects and gems, like the Medusa gem in the British Museum, this suggests his image was used in the same way.

If we examine the terracotta statues of Priapus from Alexandria in Egypt we should be able to see this notion of confrontation at work. There are many small terracotta images found in the region with a hoop for suspension suggesting they were designed to be hung, presumably in locations where they could be seen and offer some protection. Like the wooden Priapus from the shipwreck, often the backs of these images are unfinished, further emphasising that they should be viewed directly from the front. In these images Priapus is usually bearded and heavily draped but lifts his garment to reveal the phallus which was separately made and inserted into a hole so is now usually lost. Priapus is flanked by palm leaves in these statuettes which is probably a local indication of his association with fertility in nature, in the same way he is depicted with grapes and apples in Italic images. One example, part of the Townley Collection in the British Museum, stands at 19.5 centimetres tall, is made of Nile silt and probably dates to the second century CE (Figure 41). It

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<sup>250</sup> Vernant 2003: 212.

<sup>251</sup> Mack 2002: 575.

<sup>252</sup> Mart. *Epigrams* 8.40; Mart. *Epigrams* 6.72

<sup>253</sup> Gell 1998, in this influential work on art and agency, argues that artists are able to make viewers react to works of art as if they were living beings or objects able to act for themselves. This can encourage viewers to have personal relationship with the artistic objects.



**Figure 41:** Terracotta  
Priapus. 1st-3rd Century CE.  
London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=421219&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=421219&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2)  
[accessed 15/04/18].

shows a heavily draped Priapus revealing his phallus by lifting his garment and bending his knees. He is holding a *thyrsus* with grapes nearby and has slightly large facial features that render him unattractive. The back has been left plain apart from a suspension lug. Significantly, there is a sense of aggression in this image, the way the knees are bent and the phallus, now lost, protruded from the figure makes the phallic nature of Priapus very explicit and threatening; in fact this Priapus is holding his phallus further to emphasise its agency. Some of the images we have looked at previously also share some of these characteristics; for example, the Priapus painted on the pillar in House II.9.1 (Figure 3) is made exclusively frontal through the two dimensional representation and it would not have been possible to move through that space into the garden without confronting him. The amethyst gem we considered earlier (Figure 33) is also frontally represented and the phallus is emphasised through this.

Elsner has highlighted the importance of the direct confrontation of the gaze in religious ritual where the cult image of the god is full-frontal, in contrast with naturalistic depictions where they are often 'in a world of their own' and looking to the distance encouraging voyeurism on the part of those looking at them.<sup>254</sup> This suggests a power inherent in this kind of direct confrontation that is absent in other depictions of deities. In more passive images the power is primarily in the control of the viewer. Ancient sources are ambiguous about the extent to which images represent deities or are

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<sup>254</sup> Elsner 2007b: 19-21.

the deity themselves; cult statues, in particular, seem to have often been thought of as a manifestation of the deity.<sup>255</sup> As a deity usually represented as his cult statue this questions the nature of the image of Priapus itself and the power it may have held. It seems as if, in many cases, Priapus welcomes the gaze and wants to be looked at. This is also true in much priapic literature where attention is deliberately drawn to the phallus, for example in one poem a passer-by declares ‘You are terrific with your sickle and that enormous thing!’<sup>256</sup> The use of drapery in the figures particularly enhances the phallus as the primary instrument in the image by creating a frame around it that emphasises its power whilst drawing the gaze of the viewer. Here, the fact that Priapus is often knowingly depicted as a man-made image of a god is highly significant. This means that Priapus’ power is inherently bound with being looked at, one has to see Priapus to make his phallic power manifest.

Most apotropaic images of Priapus are in the *anasyrma* pose which seems to reflect a long tradition in ancient art of using full frontal, aggressive images as protection. I believe the element of surprise that comes through the unexpected confrontation with the phallus when the clothing is lifted is one of the most significant aspects of the composition and this is supported by images of hermaphrodites in the same pose. A bronze statuette previously owned by Payne Knight, who, in line with his academic interests, held a variety of erotic objects in his collection, provides a good example of this at play in the figure of hermaphrodite (Figure 42). It is a heavily draped slim female figure showing great modesty apart from the lifted bottom half of the cloak which displays an erect phallus. It is comparable to many bronze statuettes of Priapus which also have heavy drapery lifted to reveal the phallus, including a small bronze figure also in the British Museum in which he wears a similar hooded cloak to the hermaphrodite statuette (Figure 43). The nature of the surprise is different in that presence of the phallus alone provides the surprise in the female body of the hermaphrodite but in the Priapus it is the protrusion of the phallus from a herm base that is striking. However, the use of the same pose for both characters suggests that the revelation of the phallus is highly significant.

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<sup>255</sup> See Elsner 2007b: 1-28 for further discussion of the nature of cult statues and their relationship to deities.

<sup>256</sup> *Priap.* 30.



**Figure 42: Bronze Hermaphrodite statuette. 1st-3rd Century CE. London, British Museum.**

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=465381&partId=1&searchText=hermaphrodite&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=465381&partId=1&searchText=hermaphrodite&page=1)  
 [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 43: Bronze Priapus. 1st century CE - 2nd century CE. London, British Museum.**

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=464024&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=464024&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1)  
 [accessed 15/04/18].

Hermaphrodite images seem to share other characteristics with images of Priapus that may deepen our understanding of how apotropaism operated. Like Priapus, hermaphrodites tend to be found in liminal spaces like gardens and they are inherently ambiguous in their image. The combination of both male and female within one body creates much uncertainty for the viewer; however, it is the phallic element that creates most ambiguity as it can be either surprising or dangerous, or both. Katharine von Stackelberg has noted that all Pompeian wall paintings of hermaphrodites are located either adjacent to gardens or in direct view of them and she explains that Priapus and Hermaphroditus were said to have shared a mother in Venus which may make the garden a particularly appropriate location for them.<sup>257</sup> It seems more likely, however, that Priapus and Hermaphroditus were connected to Venus in mythology long after they were individually associated with gardens and liminal spaces. More significantly, von Stackelberg interprets their portrayal in wall painting as showing complementary apotropaic powers; Hermaphroditus warns of the dangers of looking while Priapus combats physical intrusion. In a painting from House VI.9.6, a famous scene combines Priapus and Hermaphroditus; it shows Pan lifting the robe of a hermaphrodite only to be repulsed by what he finds underneath (Figure 44). Overlooking this scene is a Priapus herm. This image shows the importance of surprise in the mythology of the hermaphrodite and this was both apotropaic and humorous, as we shall see later in this chapter.

Confrontation is also a striking part of the literature of Priapus. He aggressively goes about protecting property by issuing threats and drawing attention to his phallus as a weapon. Although the poems are literary constructs and cannot be used to reconstruct a divine role for Priapus, they

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<sup>257</sup> von Stackelberg 2014: 409.



**Figure 44:** Fresco of Pan and Hermaphroditus from the House of the Dioscuri, Pompeii (VI.9.6). Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: <https://plus.google.com/115214651498864827293/posts/E2dHjotvx|x> [accessed 28/04/18].

may reflect a perception of him as a protector of individuals and his property. In fact, a significant portion of *Priapea* are threats against intruders or thieves:

If you don't steal from me with wanton hand,  
You may as chaste as goddess Vesta stand:  
My member else has carved a hole so vast  
That through your own backside you could have passed.<sup>258</sup>

This example shows the common features of these literary threats; they are most often related to theft from a garden or orchard, they are sexual in nature and generally involve clever puns or reference to a grander context, such as religion or epic. These poems not only reinforce the notion that Priapus was primarily an image set up as a guardian but also that he was a direct and confrontational figure. This is reflected in both the way he directly addresses the potential thief and in the aggressive and sexual language used.<sup>259</sup>

Perhaps the most surprising aspect of these sexually violent poems to a modern reader is the fact that they were humorous to their Roman audience. In fact, many of the threatening apotropaic images of Priapus would have been comical too, deliberately designed to elicit loud, even forceful, laughter from the viewer, this raucous noise itself further protecting them from the evil eye. Like the poems, the images often show on closer inspection the cruel and aggressive nature of Roman

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<sup>258</sup> *Priap.* 31. Trans. Parker 1988.

<sup>259</sup> See Richlin 1992b: 1-26 and 81-96 for discussion of sexually aggressive Latin language. Also see Adams 1982: 21 for the association of Priapus' phallus and weaponry in this poem.

humour that can be encountered repeatedly in art and literature.<sup>260</sup> Through images of Priapus we can begin to explore humour as an integral part of social communication, from the connection between apotropaism and humour to the function of humour in defining Roman masculinity itself.

### Humorous Apotropaic Images

The fresco in the House of the Vettii demonstrates that apotropaic images could also produce laughter. In fact, both visual and literary evidence suggests that there was a clear link between humour and protection from the evil eye. It is likely that laughing at images also enhanced their apotropaic power. Speaking of the domestic sphere, Clarke describes the process of viewing such images; 'on entering a house....a Roman passed from the protection of civic deities to that of the owner. In the doorway of a vestibule the Roman viewer encountered a host of peculiar, often laughter inducing, images meant to safeguard their liminal experience.'<sup>261</sup> The Priapus fresco from the House of the Vettii has several humorous elements to it; firstly, it shows a man with a large phallus and although phallic imagery was not uncommon in the Roman world, Roman viewers seem to have found unusual bodies and bodily functions amusing. Secondly, there is also the rustic, dishevelled appearance of Priapus which would have been incongruous in the rich urban setting. Finally, the fact that the phallus is being compared to a bag of money and specifically the fact it is equal in weight is comical.<sup>262</sup> This may be a witty way of the owner declaring to all visitors that he has everything he needs in equal measure. These multiple layers of humour suggest that this was not just an image based on unintelligent superstition or affection for explicit imagery but a nuanced image that showed the owner of the house understood the visual language of the Roman world and could provide an image that could protect and amuse guests in equal measure.

There is a strong link between laughing at apotropaic images and apotropaic laughter; laughter that can ward off evil spirits both through the bodily movement and noise it causes. One of the ways this was incorporated into social practice was in the form of laughter at ceremonial occasions. Ritual laughter played an important role in Roman society and may link to apotropaic as well as social practices. For example, at the triumph soldiers (and sometimes bystanders) would mock the physical

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<sup>260</sup> Richlin 1992b is essential reading on the masculine aggression and sexual violence in Roman literature.

<sup>261</sup> Clarke 2007: 64.

<sup>262</sup> Clarke 2007: 186 believes that ancient, and modern, visitors to the House of the Vettii 'could not have failed to laugh' at the image and specifically states that the combination of the phallus, representing personal fertility, and the money, representing financial prosperity, was funny.

appearance and sexual activities of the general.<sup>263</sup> This not only reinforced the social status of those involved by temporarily allowing the disruption of order but also created a mechanism of release of social tension for a wide array of people and thus was apotropaic. In providing a controlled environment in which feelings could be released, the laughter protected the triumphant general in the long term. The noise and revelry was likely also considered to be a protective force.<sup>264</sup> Thus the practice was good for both individuals and society. Images of Priapus that are humorous may also have offered protection by making the viewer laugh out loud whilst in a dangerous situation. As we shall see later, laughter, including ritual laughter, also had an important role to play in creating social cohesion and defining Roman society. Funny images of Priapus in the domestic sphere may have performed this function on a smaller scale, creating a shared social experience for a small group, for example dinner party guests who may have laughed at and then shared their amusement at the Priapus in the doorway of the House of the Vettii.<sup>265</sup>

Humour and laughter have been subjects for philosophical, sociological and psychological discussion since Aristotle and it is, unsurprisingly, a broad and complex subject.<sup>266</sup> It is particularly difficult to assess the humour of another culture: even though laughter is universal the things that provoke it are not and they are highly subjective not just to a culture but to sub-cultures within a society. Jokes, gestures or other words and images become humorous because a particular group has defined them as such, usually because they somehow differ from 'normality' for that group. There are several theories that try to understand the mechanisms behind humour across societies; superiority theory claims we laugh at things we consider to be beneath us or to belittle others. Thus it links laughter to the maintenance of power and social order, leaving little room for unselfish motives. Incongruity theory has at its base is the notion that we find things humorous that are surprising or out of place. Relief theory is compatible with both superiority and incongruity theory and it suggests that laughter is an essential physical as well as psychological relief of built up tension; aggression is released as a reaction to 'descending incongruity' - simply put, a fall from high (sublime) to low (ridiculous)

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<sup>263</sup> Clarke 2007 and Beard 2014 both have long discussions about this in their works on humour.

<sup>264</sup> See, for example, *tintinnabula* which are apotropaic mobiles consisting of bells and phallic images. Crummy 2010: 53-54 provides some recent examples of noise making objects found in apotropaic contexts.

<sup>265</sup> Kastenmeier 2001 has shown that the doors to the House of the Vettii could be used to either his this image or to highlight it to guests depending of their status and the occasion, it seems likely that for social dinners guests would be directed so that they were greeted by Priapus at the entrance.

<sup>266</sup> Arist. *Poet* and Arist. *Rh.* both have sections about humour and laughter.





**Figure 45:** Bronze Priapus lamp. 1st century CE. London, British Museum.  
Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=431680&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=431680&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2) [accessed 15/04/18].

status.<sup>267</sup> These theories, although not wholly satisfactory explanations for all humour, do provide a frame through which we can try to understand Roman humour.<sup>268</sup>

As humour has been shown to be related to complex social structures, it is important to contextualise Roman visual humour within the contexts of Roman literature and social etiquette to evaluate the effect. It can be difficult when writing about humour, especially Roman humour which can be very different from our tastes, to remember that it is supposed to make people laugh.<sup>269</sup> Like Priapus' image, Roman humour has often been subject to moralising debates but I will try to proceed without making moral or value judgements on the humorous nature of the material in order to try to evaluate its significance in Roman culture rather than enter into a debate about whether it is 'funny' or 'obscene'.<sup>270</sup>

In many ways it is the aspects of Roman humour that would be most distasteful today, for example jokes about rape and deformities, found in images of Priapus that allow us to understand the complexities of Roman society. This is because the figure of Priapus, at first sight, often represents low, bawdy and crude entertainment but on closer inspection we find a tension between high and

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<sup>267</sup> Billig 2005: 100.

<sup>268</sup> For a full discussion of the history of theories of humour see Billig: 2005.

<sup>269</sup> Richlin 1992b: 105-143 looks in detail at the Roman taste for violent humour.

<sup>270</sup> There are many historical examples of people trying to make Roman humour less offensive, Bloom 1974: 48 for example tells of seventeenth century scholars who struggled to translate Juvenal by trying to make it less offensive to English sensibilities.

low humour in his representation that is cleverly manipulated to create complex images with varying levels of sophisticated comedy that reveal much about Roman masculine hierarchies.

### ***The Grotesque***

All of the humour theories can be seen in the Roman approach to appearance. Whilst the Romans thought of 'unbecomingness' as apotropaic it was also highly amusing to them. It was believed that appearance was linked to one's moral virtues so there were no qualms in the Roman world about laughing at the disfigured, disabled or those who were just different, such as dark skinned peoples.<sup>271</sup> Images of Priapus often tread a fine line between being funny because they are ugly and being funny because they are too foreign or un-Roman. For example, Priapus is often shown with potentially foreign items of clothing even when he is in 'Roman' settings, such as the Phrygian cap which he wears in the fresco from the House of the Vettii. As we have seen in Chapter One, Priapus is himself of ambiguous racial origin and he is certainly ugly in one way or another in most depictions.<sup>272</sup>

A first century CE lamp currently in British Museum storage displays several of these features. The lamp is bronze and in the form of Priapus with short hair and prominent ears, wearing a cloak (Figure 45). His right hand rests on his colossal phallus, which forms the nozzle; he carries leaves and fruits with his other arm, including grapes, an apple, a pine-cone and a pomegranate. Many of these attributes are specifically apotropaic because they are considered grotesque such as the prominent ears and the large phallus that forms the main part of the lamp whilst the vegetation and phallus are related to prosperity. Interestingly, he also carried an amulet on a ring around his neck, perhaps further emphasising his apotropaic potential. The large ears, ragged appearance of the cloak and use of the phallus as the lamp also add a comic edge to this figure which is no doubt another element of the apotropaic power. There are similarities between this lamp and drinking vessels found at Herculaneum that allow the drinker to drink from the phallus (Figure 46).<sup>273</sup> Like the lamp, there are

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<sup>271</sup> According to Clarke 2007: 66 some Romans bought deformed slaves to protect them from evil eye.

<sup>272</sup> Isaac 2013: 234-235 suggests that ambiguous feelings towards foreigners were a feature of proto-racism. Feelings can range from fear of the power of foreigners to superiority over their mental or moral shortcomings. This clearly reflects the treatment of Priapus' image.

<sup>273</sup> It is very difficult to be sure without other characteristics that would securely identify them as Priapus that these flasks do not represent pygmies or dwarves, however, I have included them here as the phallus gives them a strong priapic identity and they are in keeping with the spirit of other uses of Priapus' image on domestic objects. For a more detailed look at images of dwarves and pygmies as apotropaia in the ancient world see Shapiro 1984 and Henig 1984a: 245.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 46:** Drawing of a  
terracotta drinking flask found  
in Herculaneum. Naples,  
National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Varone 2000: 47.

several common features that suggest these flasks were also intended to protect and invoke laughter; they too have large ears (as well as other prominent facial features), have a phallus that offers a function and one figure carries an amulet around his neck. It seems clear that such objects were intended to be fun; in simply using such an item around others, one can imagine that it was comical to watch someone drink from the flask and that this encouraged laughing out loud.

These figures caricature all of the features the Romans found appropriate for ridicule. Cicero, providing advice on good oratory, tells us: 'The deformity and faults of the body provide some 'pretty' material for jokes.'<sup>274</sup> As Anthony Corbeill points out this not only defines the deformed as appropriate targets for laughter but does so with a witty wordplay.<sup>275</sup> These images bring to mind Horace's *Satire* 1.8 which has been described as 'a triumph of the ugly, open and unfinished side of Priapus' nature.'<sup>276</sup> A Priapus statue alone in the gardens of Maecenas is disturbed by two women trying to dig up dead bodies to enact some erotic magic.<sup>277</sup> Tension is heightened through the poem as Priapus describes how frightened he is but within the last few lines this is broken:

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<sup>274</sup> Cic. *De. Or.* 2.239.

<sup>275</sup> Corbelli 1996: 22.

<sup>276</sup> Plaza 2006: 70-71. Farrell 2007: 142 associates bodily functions with 'low' literary genres.

<sup>277</sup> Edmunds 2009 argues that the Priapus in this poem was in fact a real statue with visible cracks and splits in the wood but there is little evidence to support this.

With a sudden report like a burst balloon I let a fart  
Which split my fig-wood buttocks; the hags scurried off down town;  
Canidia dropped her false teeth, the high wig  
tumbled from Sagana's head, and herbs and enchanted love knots  
fell off their arms. If only you'd seen it! You'd have laughed and  
cheered.<sup>278</sup>

The comic effect lies not only in breaking the tension but in doing so with something so visceral and in bringing down the hideous 'witches' to the status of dishevelled old women. Maria Plaza has shown that the raising of the status of the women through Priapus' fear to make it more comical when they are defeated is a common technique in satire and this allows us to see Priapus as rightfully regaining his status through action, albeit an involuntary one.<sup>279</sup> It seems that there is something apotropaic in the bodily function of breaking wind and the noise it makes that is similar to laughter. Although these functions are far from the ideal of the calm and measured actions of a Roman, in physically losing control of the body and allowing it to make noise and movement one can actually repel harmful forces.<sup>280</sup> This is reminiscent of the flasks or lamps which create a humorous bodily function by using the phallus in an unexpected way.

Some of the comedy in the scene comes from the surprise and the break in the tension; therefore we should consider whether the element of surprise in images was intended not only to shock evil spirits but also to astonish the viewer into laughing out loud and therefore creating a noise and bodily contortion that protects them.<sup>281</sup> For example, in the fresco showing Pan removing the cloak from Hermaphrodite (Figure 44), Pan's reaction is very visual most likely to encourage viewers to share his surprise and laugh at him, and from their own sense of relief. Therefore, the combination of the presence of the phallic Priapus and Hermaphrodite and the viewers' laughter may have made this a strong apotropaic image. This does not mean that the only function of humour was protection. In fact, this image shows knowledge of Greek mythology, Roman culture and gender roles that add many other layers of wittiness to it and make it appropriate entertainment in its sophisticated domestic context.

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<sup>278</sup> Hor. *Sat.* 1.8. 46-50. Trans. Rudd 1979.

<sup>279</sup> Plaza 2006: 68.

<sup>280</sup> Fowler 2007 describes in detail the expected bodily comportment of the elite roman male.

<sup>281</sup> Contortion of the body is related to ugliness which we have also seen is a powerful apotropaion. There are many statuettes that show a twisted or exaggerated movement, usually of a dwarf or deformed person, which seem to have an apotropaic function.

## Elite Laughter

Although there is a clear link between apotropaism and humour in the images of Priapus we have looked at, the archaeological and literary contexts also suggest that there was comedy in visual representations of Priapus that went beyond apotropaism. Often this humour is a sharp and sophisticated exploration of Roman society, especially from the point of view of the cultural elite (wealthy and/or educated men). Humour is usually a mechanism of power in a society, whether that is imagined as a literal force to drive away evil or a way of maintaining power structures. Humour can display, manipulate and contest power so it must be significant that Priapus is chosen as a tool to demonstrate and negotiate social standing. We should, therefore, also consider the function of images that were humorous for reasons beyond apotropaism and explore why the humour is often so sophisticated and complex even though the image of Priapus usually remains simple and rustic.

The power of laughter to form or identify cohesive social groups has been well documented.<sup>282</sup> In Roman society it is possible to identify a variety of social groups based on gender, wealth and citizenship, but as a clear representation of male sexuality and power the image of Priapus seems to speak most obviously about the status of culturally elite men. We also have an array of literature that allows us to examine the ways in which elite males engaged with Priapus as a deity and figure that embodied their world. Images of Priapus can provide insight into the ways in which powerful men used shared humour (or in-jokes) to reinforce their own status and make comment on the status of others. In this context what may at first seem a coarse joke is often a sophisticated instrument for maintaining social order.

This elite group were preoccupied with displaying their masculinity, education, sophistication and wealth, all of which were essential components of their social status. Therefore, much Roman humour focuses on these issues, not through laughing at what this group are but by laughing at what they are not; essentially by excluding others through in-jokes and put-downs. Thus, elite humour was often about a mismatch between what (or who) you are and what you should be or want to be.

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<sup>282</sup> Recently with specific reference to the Romans by Beard 2014: 3-15; also see Clarke 2007 and Corbeill 1996.



**Figure 47:** Onyx cameo showing a nymph and Priapus. 1st century BCE - 1st century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=432132&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=432132&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=2) [accessed 18/04/18].



**Figure 48:** Terracotta mask showing a woman and Priapus. London, British Museum.

Photo:  
[http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=41528&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=41528&partId=1&searchText=priapus&page=1) [accessed 15/04/18].

Priapus was an essential figure in this self-definition primarily because of his ambiguity, he allowed a discourse about what it meant to be part of this group because he could simultaneously reflect them and also be made to act as an 'other.' He was highly masculine, witty and Roman but could also be impotent, rustic and foreign, and the tensions brought about by this are often where the humour lies. The Priapus from the House of the Vettii doorway, for example, emphasises masculinity, wealth and shows knowledge of Roman culture but at the same time it is not quite clear if he is foreign or Roman and although the setting is rustic the wittiness of the image suggests a certain urban elegance. I believe that Priapus was a comical figure precisely because of the tensions he represents and particularly because he articulates the differences between 'high' and 'low' culture. We shall see that this tension can manifest, not only in high literature versus bawdy obscenities or the urban sophistication juxtaposed with rural simplicity that we saw in Chapter One, but also in the status of Roman citizens, the power of the gods and sexual taboos. All of which we will encounter as sources of humour in this section.

### Urban versus Rustic

It is highly significant that although Priapus' image is bound with the rustic world, the humour in the visual depictions is very much grounded in an urban context and appreciated by urbanites that saw rusticity either as a fantasy or as something undesirable. As Mary Beard has shown in her recent work on Roman laughter, the Romans of the first century CE frequently used a narrative that defined

their humour as markedly sophisticated and gentle compared to the bawdiness of the past.<sup>283</sup>

Priapus, both in image and literature, exemplifies the tension in this distinction as he is a deliberately crude figure associated with the past, surrounded by the wit and intelligence of elite sophistication. As we have seen in Chapter One, the crude visual image of Priapus was a way of embellishing a narrative about his ancient roots; the connection with bawdy, base humour that at first seems very unrefined undoubtedly plays a part in that narrative. The knowledge that the rustic image was part of a commentary on Roman tradition was also probably an 'in-joke' amongst the educated.

A terracotta plaque from the Witt Collection in the British Museum not only shows Priapus placed in a rural environment but emphasises the bawdy nature of his character (Figure 48). The scene is on the back of a mask and seems to mock the *topos* of a scene in which a nude woman sacrifices to Priapus (for example see Figure 47). There is a Priapus in a statue form and a nude woman, older and plumper than usually found in similar scenes, is arranging objects on an altar with her back to Priapus.<sup>284</sup> It seems that she will be penetrated by the large phallus if she takes a step back. It is difficult to know whether this is intentional on her part or not but it is quite possibly left ambiguous for the viewer to read what they will into it. Because of this ambiguity this image reflects the bawdiness of the *Priapea* and may refer to the threats of Priapus and his male prowess or the women he complains wear him out with their insatiable lust.<sup>285</sup> It is also possible to read an element of parody into this image when compared with other images of women sacrificing to Priapus found on gems.

The way in which Priapus is presented in images, such as the terracotta plaque, as a rudimentary, stationary statue that seems lacking in agency is exploited humorously in various ways. In these images it is unclear whether it is to his advantage that he is such a statue but elsewhere it is clearly used to make a mockery of him. In one poem of the *Carmina Priapea* a girl laughs at Priapus' appearance:

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<sup>283</sup> Beard 2014: 68.

<sup>284</sup> The physical representation of this woman is reminiscent of contemporary depictions of Cleopatra that aim to mock and belittle her, for example on terracotta lamps like the one in the British Museum that depicts her on top of a crocodile with a large phallus.  
([http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectId=439804&partId=1&people=97259&peoA=97259-1-7&page=1](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collection_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectId=439804&partId=1&people=97259&peoA=97259-1-7&page=1))

<sup>285</sup> See, for example, *Priap.* 26 where Priapus complains that he is being worn out by lustful women every night and *Priap.* 18 where he declares his penis is so large no woman can be 'too loose'.

What are you laughing at, you silly wench?  
 I was not made on Praxiteles' bench;  
 Nor Scopas not Phidias smoothed me with sand.  
 I was carved out of wood by a rustic's hand.  
 'Be Priapus!' he said, as he finished his work.  
 Yet you look at me and you giggle and smirk.  
 Only too well do you see't as a joke  
 That such a thick pole from my loins should poke.<sup>286</sup>

Here we see both the general unrefined appearance of Priapus and specifically the large phallus emphasised as worthy of laughter, yet these are also the qualities that associate him with good fortune and apotropaic magic. In another poem from the collection, Priapus declares he has been made a 'laughing stock' after a poorly performed offering has attracted a neighbour's dog to do something to Priapus' phallus, precisely what is unclear but it is likely it has licked or chewed it.<sup>287</sup> Ultimately Priapus is so disgruntled he threatens irrumation as punishment if it happens again, the fact he is unable to protect himself highlights his man-made nature and suggests impotence despite his aggression. These poems suggest that it was acceptable, if not expected, to find Priapus amusing and perhaps the poems, like the images, could have the effect of making people laugh out loud. The humour of these poems and many of the images that emphasise Priapus' rusticity are examples of superiority theory because the butt of the joke is those of a lesser status and often the victims of misfortune. However, it is worth noting that all of these situations allow Priapus to retain some power as his phallus still threatens punishment. This perhaps adds another layer of comedy to those that understood the concept of a rustic, impotent god was part of a witty game.

In these examples, we see crudeness deliberately articulated by sophisticated artists and writers to create incongruity and thus, another level of humour that is more nuanced than superiority humour. It may also suggest that all images of Priapus that look crude or old were humorous in elite Roman contexts. We see depictions of Priapus similar to the one in the poem above, for example, in the painting from the Villa of the Mysteries that shows a Priapus herm which is clearly roughly made from wood without any additional embellishments, even arms have been considered superfluous (Figure 49). The phallus of Priapus clearly plays an important role in these images; although it is

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<sup>286</sup> *Priap.* 10. Trans. Parker 1988.

<sup>287</sup> O'Connor 1989 for discussion of the possible interpretations.





**Figure 49:** Detail of Priapus in a fresco from the Villa of the Mysteries at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com)  
 [accessed 15/04/18].

unsophisticated it is obviously funny. This may be linked to the apotropaic function of the phallus but it may also represent a more basic humour that Romans attributed to the countryside and ‘simple’ people even though it was a contemporary, urban creation.<sup>288</sup> Mime was very popular on the urban stage, although it was considered base, unrefined humour by cultural elites. It featured actors wearing artificial and large phalli, perhaps playing the character of Priapus.<sup>289</sup> Hutchinson has suggested that a small statuette in Colchester depicts a comic actor dressed as Priapus; it seems to wear a mask while lifting a robe to reveal a very large phallus (Figure 50).<sup>290</sup> In this context, all images of Priapus and especially those that accentuate the phallus, like the double phallused Priapus in the brothel, could be comical.

Distinctions between the urban and rustic worlds were clearly an important way for elite Romans to define themselves, although this discourse is far from simple. One had to admire rustic simplicity and the past whilst being urbane enough to understand that this longing for a rural life was not supposed to be reality but an artistic and rhetorical device. Those who did not comprehend this or those who were actually unsophisticated rustics were clearly outsiders and, therefore, mocked.

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<sup>288</sup> Perkins and Nevett 2000: 213-4 argue that the urban environment was essential to the Roman concept of civilisation not just as a distance from their own rustic neighbours but also the ‘barbarians’ of the empire who lived in villages.

<sup>289</sup> Florence 2014 shows that comedy and mime were not only popular but also used to assert masculine superiority through sexual jokes. Duncan 2006 argues that mime set out to deliberately debase ‘high culture’.

<sup>290</sup> Hutchinson 1983: 252-3.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 50:** Bronze  
Priapus/actor statuette.  
Colchester, Colchester  
and Essex Museum.  
Photo: Hutchinson 1983: 605.

Many images of Priapus reflect this as they are expensive decorations that depict a deity supposed to be made of wood and are housed in fine urban homes rather than the rural setting in which Priapus is supposed to belong. Surely, this would have been amusing to those aware of the juxtaposition at play in these images. Even the fresco in the House of the Vettii (Figure 27), which shows Priapus dressed in an ill-fitting tunic with an unkempt beard, is an expensive painting in a finely decorated house that also shows Priapus with lots of money and resources, and uses tension between high and low to add to the visual impact. A similar theme is repeated in a variety of literature. We have seen in Chapter One that images of Priapus and poets make claims to rural simplicity in both language and life style but Roman satirists, who specifically use humour to critique society, also frequently make reference to having innocent aims and high moral standings.<sup>291</sup> They create a humble public personality for themselves, using a rural background to conjure the image of distance from the modernity and vice of the urban world.<sup>292</sup> However, much like the urban figure of Priapus the satirists are very much part of the sophisticated urban society and this is reflected in their style and subject matter. Their writing also often shows this conflict in their experiences of travel; they idolise the countryside yet leaving the city is usually ill-fated.<sup>293</sup>

Images that show Priapus in a rustic setting play with the idea of high versus low art and status. For example, images in which erotes are harvesting, as is the case in an architrave relief from Domitian's villa built in the first century CE (Figure 51). The relief, which decorated a *nymphaeum*, shows several erotes harvesting grapes with Priapus holding grapes in his tunic watching their activity; this manipulates the reality of hard work in the rural world to make a whimsical image presented on the

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<sup>291</sup> Horace, for example, dedicates Book 2 Satire 2 to simple living.

<sup>292</sup> Plaza 2006: 102-105. Plaza identifies this as a way to create a public personality that is embedded in the social rather than heroic world but that still has a strong moral compass.

<sup>293</sup> Lucilius and Horace write of disastrous journeys outside of the city. See Ferriss-Hill 2015: 45-61 for a full discussion of urbanity in Roman satire.

walls of urban homes or on marble plaques.<sup>294</sup> Images like this create a quaint impression of an imagined rural world and reinforce the status of the patrons as above everything that they depict; therefore, they work on the basis of not only incongruity but also of the superiority of the elite Roman male. In the *Satyricon*, Trimalchio is mocked for having paintings of actual working scenes decorating his home; this is used to suggest he is lowly both because he has practical experience of work and because he does not understand the purpose of the images that reduce work to a blithe rural fantasy.<sup>295</sup>

Rural work is inextricably linked to the undesirability of working for a wage (or even worse for free as a slave) in Roman culture. The image from the doorway of the House of the Vettii, which weighs money against Priapus' phallus, shows money as an important part of prosperity and as important as virility. Although wealth was significant to the elites, too much focus on it or physically earning it yourself was considered tasteless. Petronius mocks freedmen for their interest in it, naming Trimalchio's household gods 'Gain, another Luck, and the third Profit.'<sup>296</sup> These clearly raise to divine status the main priorities of Trimalchio, and his freedmen dinner guests: work and money, attributes that distinguish the freedmen from elite citizens of Rome in literature. Much of the conversation at the dinner focuses on the value of things, for example, they discuss issues of inheritance and food prices.<sup>297</sup> Although much of this conversation seems mundane it serves to characterise them as freedmen rather than elite and was probably highly amusing in an elite Roman context in which a cohesive sense of superiority was reinforced by visual and literary fantasies.

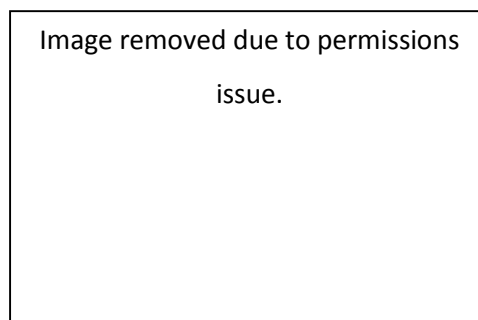
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<sup>294</sup> Darwall Smith 1994 discusses the villa of Domitian and *nymphaeum* which housed this architrave. There are similar themes at play in the images of erotes working from the House of the Vettii which Clarke 2003b: 105 describes as 'pretty, whimsical translations of the sweaty realities of work into the never-never land of myth'.

<sup>295</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 29. Trimalchio has a painting of himself at a slave market alongside images of the rest of his career.

<sup>296</sup> Hackworth Petersen 2006: 4.

<sup>297</sup> Andreau 2009: 118.



**Figure 51:** Marble architrave relief from Domitian's Villa at Castel Gandolfo. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE.  
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1035.

### Masculine versus Feminine

We have already seen that superiority theory can be applied to much Roman humour and this allowed a body of socially superior males to define themselves largely by what they were not and to control the behaviour of the group by setting up a series of transgressions that were laughable. One had to laugh at the same transgressions to show 'normality', otherwise it may suggest guilt in violating social norms and the laughter may turn. Cicero emphasises in *On the Orator* that wit is useful 'because it proves the orator himself to be a man of taste, or learning, or polish', so not only is elite humour about not being 'other' it is also a way to show you are of the highest standards of society in all aspects.<sup>298</sup>

As a representation of male virility and phallic power, Priapus was an important way of representing what it meant to be male in the Roman world. As far as Richlin is concerned, Priapus was a talking phallus and this phallus represented one thing; the dominant elite male in Roman society.<sup>299</sup> If the phallus of Priapus not only provided apotropaic protection and crude humour but also symbolised the status of aggressive and powerful masculinity it may further explain the popularity of Priapus as a personal emblem. The amethyst gem in the British Museum, discussed earlier, which shows Priapus in a full frontal pose is a good example of this (Figure 33). In this rendering he is without arms, or at least his arms are not visible because they are wrapped in a mantle, and with a crown of

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<sup>298</sup> Cic. *De Or.* 2.236. Langlands 2006: 16 shows that behaviour was largely regulated by fear of diminution in the eyes of the community. Barton 2002 supports this, showing that censure and shame were important ways of policing behaviour. Laughter was an important tool in shaming others.

<sup>299</sup> Richlin 1992b: 116. Langlands 2006: 6 also explains that sexual ideology seems to have operated on a 'priapic model' where being the penetrator confers social power.

leaves and so the pose seems designed to make the phallus the primary focus of the image. Given the clear visual appreciation of the powerful male, in this image and others, it should not surprise us that in humour based around Priapus the butts of the jokes are almost always opposites of the ideal male (women, *cinaedi*, cuckolds and so on) and the purpose of the joke is to unify elite males in their superiority. Clearly the audience of this kind of humour is supposed to identify with Priapus and to find the jokes funny they would have to have an understanding of the subordinate nature of the 'others.'

Often this superiority is presented through sexuality which is one of the reasons Priapus exemplifies it so well. Plautus and Terence, republican playwrights, equate the performance of sexuality with citizen status.<sup>300</sup> It was essential for a male citizen to be virile and sexually active both to ensure population growth but also to establish a standing as a dominant member of society. This dominance is often augmented by sexual aggression which we see in Roman humour concerning Priapus, the *Carmina Priapea* in particular suggesting that the rape and degradation of non-elites was very comical.

As well as celebrating the dominance of the elite male over those he uses sexually, this type of superiority humour also finds amusement in men who fail to live up to the expectations.<sup>301</sup> Priapus makes an appropriate deity to oversee the *Satyricon* because of the ongoing theme of virility and impotence that runs through Encolpius' story.<sup>302</sup> This issue was of the upmost importance to elite Romans and it was highly amusing to see someone else impotent. In the Quartilla episode of the *Satyricon*, Encolpius is subjected to sexual torture in the form of an orgy led by women and *cinaedi*. In this scene much of the humour comes from the fact that Encolpius fails to be 'manly' enough to protect himself, and is 'stained' and humiliated because of his transgressions against the cult of Priapus. It is as if Priapus is actually enacting the threats we encounter in the *Priapea* through the members of his cult. Throughout the oratory of Cicero we find common accusations against his opponents of similar sexual transgressions and effeminacy. Clearly it was a humorous and effective

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<sup>300</sup> Florence 2014: 375 for detailed discussion.

<sup>301</sup> Beard 2014: 108. Since it was so closely tied to status, laughter could also be dangerous for the elite male, Cicero and Quintilian both stress the inherent danger in laughing; that the laughter can rebound and the joker can easily become the butt.

<sup>302</sup> Courtney 2001; see also Holzberg 2005 on the theme of impotence in the *Priapea*.

way to slight an opponent.<sup>303</sup> It also shows that the threats of Priapus are not just related to causing physical harm but also to damaging the status and reputation of those who anger him.

Like Encolpius, not all men are virile and in control all of the time; occasionally we see this in the figure of Priapus in the *Carmina Priapea* as we have discussed, but the uber-masculinity of Priapus is also used in images to highlight the failings of other men. In a painting from the House of Marcus Lucretius in Pompeii (V.4.a) a drunk Hercules leans on Priapus, who, unusually, is shown here as a character in the action rather than a statue, while Omphale stands beside them wearing Hercules' lion skin (Figure 52). This is a reference to the myth in which Omphale, Queen of Lydia, emasculates Hercules, who is in servitude to her, by dressing him in women's clothing and making him do women's work such as spinning. Depictions of the myth are quite popular in domestic settings but the presence of Priapus seems to be unique to this painting. Much has been said about this story's expression of Roman fears of female power and it would be logical to see Priapus in this scene as a reminder of the lack of masculine prowess shown by Hercules in the situation.<sup>304</sup> There is also much humour to be found in the depictions of this myth, and the reversal of roles between man and woman fits the model of incongruity theory well. The Priapus in this image is dressed in a long robe but with his phallus clearly visible through the folds of the cloth and viewed by an erote who lifts the bottom of the robe and looks up. Priapus is also carrying fruit in his tunic and therefore emphasises all of the fecundity that Hercules lacks in this image whilst emasculated by the woman wearing his clothing, effeminised by the richness of the cloth draped around him and incapacitated by his drunkenness. Another erote in the painting holds a mirror in the direction of the viewer, potentially inviting them to consider whether they belong in the scene and who they would be. In the *Fasti*, Ovid relates the myth with much humour focusing on small amusing details such as the way Hercules' 'giant feet split the little shoes' and how he 'fractured her bracelets, not made for such arms'.<sup>305</sup>

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<sup>303</sup> See, for example, Cicero's second philippic against Mark Anthony in which he accuses Mark Anthony of being a 'rent-boy' and driven by 'lust and money' (Cic. *Phil.* 2.44-45).

<sup>304</sup> For example, Barton 2007 looks at the links between the representation of Hercules in Ovid and effeminacy in the early Roman Empire; Heckster 2004 emphasises the feminisation of Hercules and argues that this was not political propaganda against Mark Antony but a popular mythological image.

<sup>305</sup> Ov. *Fast.* 2.303.



**Figure 52:** Priapus, Hercules and Omphale fresco from the House of Marcus Lucretius at Pompeii (V.4.a). Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.

Photo: [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hercules\\_and\\_Omphale\\_\(House\\_of\\_Marcus\\_Lucretius\).jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Hercules_and_Omphale_(House_of_Marcus_Lucretius).jpg) [accessed 15/04/18].

The plaque on the back of the mask and portrayal of Omphale suggest that, as the opposite of men, women are a frequent target in Roman humour. Literary examples suggest that the dominant male Roman viewer looking at these scenes would think of the women as out of control and seeking pleasure. In *Satire 6* Juvenal, who wrote satire poems in the first and second centuries CE, uses Priapus as an emblem of disrespect for traditional Roman values, which largely contradicts the ways in which he is usually used but clearly serves Juvenal's purpose in linking Priapus with overly sexual women like Quartilla. The satire describes the women at the festival of Bona Dea:

The Pelvis is stirred by the pipe, and Priapus' maenads are swept  
along, frenzied by horn and wine alike, swinging their hair in a  
circle, and howling. Then what a yearning for sex erupts in their  
hearts; what cries are emitted as their lust pulsates; what rivers of  
vintage liquor come coursing down their drunken legs!<sup>306</sup>

He also goes on to accuse the women of having sex with donkeys at the festival if men are not available.<sup>307</sup> This reflects the poems of the *Carmina Priapea* in which Priapus complains about women stealing from him or visiting him to have sex, in one poem he even pleads to have his phallus removed to escape their lusts:

O citizens, Romans, I pray you please,  
There must be a limit – I'm brought to my knees;  
For passionate women from hereabout  
Importune me nightly and tire me out;  
And always they're lustful as sparrows in spring.<sup>308</sup>

This description and the plaque in the British Museum, in which the woman might be penetrated by a Priapus statue (Figure 47), also resemble a famous sarcophagus in Naples, discussed in Chapter Three, which shows a female faun penetrating herself with the phallus of a statue (Figure 81).<sup>309</sup> It has been suggested that the characterisation of women as overtly sexual or acting like men in the early imperial period was a reaction to the increasing power and freedom of women in society. If this is the case these examples show how aggressive, masculine humour, embodied by Priapus in art and literature, was used to belittle the power of women. From the portrayal of Omphale to the 'insatiable' lusts of ordinary women their behaviour is linked to Priapus in order to degrade them and provide amusement for the male audience. These women could be seen as acting like men but their juxtaposition with the image of Priapus, who symbolises powerful masculinity, emphasises the fact they are not men and mocks them for this. However, this technique also mocks the men who are unable to control women and, to some extent, Priapus who is unable to stop these women from using him. His man-made, stationary nature may prevent him from taking action, if we consider the

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<sup>306</sup> Juv. 6.313-319. Trans. Rudd 1992.

<sup>307</sup> Juv. 6.334. Donkeys are also an animal particularly associated with Priapus both in his worship at Lampsacus and in literature such as Ovid's *Fasti* (1.391-440; 6.319-348). For a discussion of the festival of Bona Dea and the participation of Roman women see Staples 1998.

<sup>308</sup> *Priap.* 26. Trans. Parker 1988.

<sup>309</sup> This image has such enduring popularity it was included by Famin in his infamous book of erotica.



plaque in which the woman has her back to Priapus and assume that she is in control that renders Priapus helpless. Even in matters of masculinity Priapus' image retains much ambiguity. One of the reasons for making opponents the butt of a joke is to silence them with the laughter of the dominant group so they cease to be a threat but in bothering to ridicule them in the first place there is, at least, an acceptance of their existence and that this may be a threat to the established order.<sup>310</sup>

Although there is clearly merit in seeing Priapus as an emblem of Roman male culture and it explains much of the aggressive humour based upon his image, the Priapus we see in both the art and literature is also highly ambiguous. He often acts as the guardian of dominant male status by threatening and humiliating 'others' especially women and effeminate men but he also shows the fallibility of men by occasionally becoming the subject of ridicule himself, emphasising the constant danger to those at the top of the social ladder both from upstart others and also from one's own mistakes.

### Romanness versus Greekness

Hercules is not the only classical figure to be laughed at in Roman art and Priapus has an important role to play in reducing classical loftiness to Roman laughter. In fact, visual humour frequently undermines the 'super-egoic structures' of Roman culture, questioning the role of the state, gods, heroes and even family.<sup>311</sup> However, it particularly takes aim at elements of culture derived from the Greek world, such as epic, that were simultaneously the backbone of Roman culture and a threat to Roman *mores*. Priapus represents the down-to-earth, masculine nature of the Roman character and mocks the poetic and effeminate disposition of the Greeks. He is well set up to do this by the construction of his character as an old Roman god, as we have already seen in Chapter One, but he is, of course, originally Greek himself so there is potentially yet another layer of amusement to be found in this ambiguity.<sup>312</sup> The humour brought about by the ambiguity of the image of Priapus is very aware of the complexities of Greek and Roman cultural interactions and shows both the use of Greek motifs in Roman art and how that could be undermined. Similarly, the *Priapea* use Greek conventions to mock Greek conventions; Eugene O'Connor describes the *Priapeum* as 'a certain type

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<sup>310</sup> Habinek 2005: 182.

<sup>311</sup> Clarke 2007: 8.

<sup>312</sup> See also Chapter One for a discussion of Priapus' origins and the ambiguity between 'Greek' education and 'Roman' values.

of poem, one that, in a sense, sneered at more serious literary forms, particularly epic, by using epic conventions in an absurd way.’<sup>313</sup>

The fountain statue from the peristyle of the House of the Vettii (Figure 39) is not only comical because of the unexpected nature of it as a water hose and the play on ejaculation but it also seems to mock loftier sculpture. The style of this Priapus is very much in keeping with the late classical. He is a marble sculpture of good quality and rather than showing signs of unkempt rusticity he is clean shaven and wears his hair short. His body has defined musculature more in common with a Greek athlete than a Priapus herm; he even leans against a pillar draped in cloth and raises his arm, the style of this representation has much in common with classical sculpture like Praxiteles’ Hermes with the infant Dionysus (Figure 53). By taking a late classical style and making it crude in nature and small in stature the artist has brought a lofty image down to a low level and thus enhances the humour. This reflects the process often seen in satire of degrading subjects through exposing the baser elements of their nature. It also calls to mind Priapus emphasising that he is not made by a classical sculptor such as Praxiteles in the *Priapea* as this statue is actually similar in style to classical sculpture.<sup>314</sup> This contributes to the comedy as its appearance is the opposite of descriptions of Priapus and the educated would know that this is not how he is supposed to look. All of these conflicting contexts would have made this fountain highly amusing to a well-educated patron or guest. The *Satyricon* in particular uses Priapus to degrade lofty subjects to baser physical urges and the *Dinner of Trimalchio* scene is an extended tableau mocking pretentiousness. Towards the end of the dinner, a Priapus is presented on the table in the *anasyrma* pose. Encolpius tells us: ‘A dish with some cakes on it had now been put there, a Priapus made by the confectioner standing in the middle, holding up every kind of fruit and grapes in his wide apron in the conventional style.’ To the guests’ surprise they are squirted with saffron when the cakes and fruit are touched.<sup>315</sup> Their surprise makes this an entertaining scene which emphasises crude bodily functions and reflects the way in which the fountain statue at the House of the Vettii and the phallic flasks discussed earlier operated through evoking a similar sense of surprise.

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<sup>313</sup> O’Connor 1989: 37.

<sup>314</sup> *Priap.*10.

<sup>315</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 2.9.60



**Figure 53: Marble Hermes Statue.**  
 4th century BCE. Olympia,  
 Archaeology Museum.  
 Photo: tetraktys (talk) 20:26, 20 October  
 2013 (UTC) [CC BY-SA 2.5  
 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.5>)]. [accessed 28/04/18].

Priapus' image frequently contrasts elegant materials and design with crudeness and it often seems out of place in the luxurious settings in which he can be found. Not only is this humorous in the urban versus rustic dichotomy but it also seems to mock the refinement and high art associated with 'Greek luxury'. Similarly, the *Satyricon* mocks Greek literature parodying the Homeric epics, especially the *Odyssey*.<sup>316</sup> The overarching theme of the *Satyricon* is artificial loftiness, particularly in the arts and literature, and many of the episodes are based around the conflict of such high-mindedness with reality.<sup>317</sup> Therefore, using a god as vulgar and unrefined as Priapus in place of an Olympian fits the theme well. The Vettii fountain similarly reduces the nobility of a familiar sculptural style to something a little vulgar. The comical incongruity of images of Priapus are also reflected in the poems of the *Priapea* that reduce the noble characters to (perhaps more realistic) base urges. Most pertinent are poems in which Priapus (as the poetic persona) refers to Greek epic, in fact, poem 68 takes both the *Iliad* and *Odyssey* and retells them with the phallus as the driving force behind the actions of the characters; for example, Achilles' anger is put down to sexual frustration, and Priapus concludes that he could have replaced Odysseus and satisfied Penelope.<sup>318</sup> Priapus is once again being used as an *exemplum* of Roman characteristics in these parodies by

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<sup>316</sup> Although I do not see the novel as a parody of just one genre alone as there are undoubtedly influences from a wide variety of sources. See Mordine 2013 for a comparison of key events in the *Odyssey* and the plot of the *Satyricon*.

<sup>317</sup> See Conte 1996 and Dentith 2000: 47- 48.

<sup>318</sup> *Priap.* 68.

embodying a 'down-to-earth' ideal. He is also using his phallus as a 'weapon' in these parodies, using its comic force to attack artificiality and loftiness.

We see in both the fountain statue and the *Satyricon* the use of incongruity, specifically high versus low art (or taste), as a form of humour. Priapus is clearly the deity most apt to represent the world of the *Satyricon* where high art is contrasted with poor imitation (somewhat ironically since the novel itself is a clever imitation of other literary forms), nobility is contrasted with crudeness, and manliness is judged by sexual prowess. The Quartilla episode in particular enables us to appreciate how the idea of a cult to Priapus was manipulated to create a clever parody. The very physical, fast paced comedy of this episode seems to resemble Roman mime.<sup>319</sup> We do not know as much about mime as we do about other theatrical performances but it seems that mime was a highly visual comic performance often improvised and slapstick in nature and featuring highly sexual content, possibly even showing sexual acts or acting them out on stage.<sup>320</sup> Perhaps this also provides another parallel for the image of the woman sacrificing to Priapus on the back of the terracotta mask that we discussed earlier as it seems explicitly to reference a humorous sexual encounter. Further to the farcical nature of a mime providing humour in the Quartilla episode, G. B. Conte has shown that the behaviour of Quartilla actually descends from mimicking tragedy, for example wearing a veil and pleading for assistance, to acting out a mime.<sup>321</sup> This mirrors the degradation of the cult of Priapus from sacred to obscene that we see as the novel progresses and uses the contradictions between Priapus as powerful deity and an aggressive, lusty relic of a cruder time. The humour here is based on the clear conflict between 'high' culture and 'low' bodily gratification, as well as the slapstick comedy that comes from the relentless physical action. This is very much like the humour in the sarcophagus in which the Priapus being used by the female satyr is involved in a very physical comic scene and what could have been a reverential cult scene is instead a farce of lust and drunkenness.

As we have seen, Priapus' image is often focused on high versus low in culture and particularly the nature of rusticity. Since rusticity is idealised in many of those images, such as the Amiternum Couch, which we have seen in Chapter One, deliberately emphasising ideals of simplicity, hard work or abundance, Priapus can be used as a symbol of these 'Roman' values and contrasted with the 'Greek' luxuries. The protagonist of the *Satyricon*, Encolpius, is in many ways a parody of a young

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<sup>319</sup> Beard 2014: 171-2.

<sup>320</sup> Clarke 2007: 26-27.

<sup>321</sup> Conte 1996: 112.

man of 'high culture', educated in the arts. Time and again he romanticises a situation or envisages himself as an epic hero but the plot constantly brings him down to the practicalities of life. The structure of the novel itself as an epic parody puts him in the position of hero but the text also makes it clear he is not worthy of such a position. The loftiness of Encolpius is in many ways symbolic of Greekness. Whether Encolpius is in fact Greek has been debated, but it is more significant that luxury and beauty, which the Roman's consistently stereotype as Greek ideals, are starkly contrasted with what may be considered a more Roman approach to life focused on survival and simple pleasures rather than the superfluous extravagance that is mocked throughout the story.<sup>322</sup> Petronius repeatedly shows Encolpius to abandon his ideals in favour of petty theft, sex and quarrels. This is very much reflected in the fresco from the doorway of the House of the Vettii where Priapus is shown weighing his phallus and money. This suggests that, much like the owners of the House of the Vettii, Petronius had a keen awareness of the humour to be found in contrasting the baser instincts of man with high ideals.

### Freedmen versus Elite

We have already seen that the images of Priapus in the House of the Vettii are both sophisticated and ambiguous, but they have not always been perceived in this way. I would like to finish this section by bringing together the humorous themes and looking again at the images in the house as the property of freedmen. In many ways freedmen were the epitome of 'other' for the elite Roman male and were perhaps the biggest threat of all the 'others' with which the elite had to contend as they could be wealthy, well educated, virile and powerful. We find much Roman humour directed against them in an attempt to mark them out as foreign, uneducated in Roman culture, and permanently degraded by their previous experience of labour and sexual submission. In this way freedmen also come to exemplify 'lowness' in much Roman humour and characterised as lacking the taste and sophistication of the traditional elite. These attitudes have also greatly influenced the way images of Priapus are interpreted today and they show that we cannot rely on visual and literary associations without fully understanding the context.

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<sup>322</sup> Richlin 2009 suggests Encolpius and his companions are freedmen, or slaves, and possibly Greek but they also show familiarity with a wide range of Roman culture and language.

The House of the Vettii appears to have been owned by two freedmen, thought to have been brothers, A. Vettius Restitutus and A. Vettius Conviva.<sup>323</sup> They had sufficient wealth for Conviva to become an *Augustalis* and the house, although not the largest at Pompeii, is decorated throughout to a high standard with high quality fourth style wall painting including mythological tableaux and architectural perspectives. My intention here is to attempt to study the artistic taste in the House of the Vettii but I intend to use the elite bias of the literary sources to understand how the images have been interpreted as part of a visual language of Roman culture determined by elite values.<sup>324</sup> As we have seen, Priapus was a motif commonly used by the social elites to reinforce their identity, it is therefore possible that when we see images of Priapus used in a context such as the House of the Vettii it is an example of a patron trying to show themselves as part of that elite class and as able to understand the jokes within such works.

Priapus' image very much reflects the artifice of Roman social constructs. As we have seen, the fountain statue in the House of the Vettii deliberately plays on the artifice of the peristyle garden and is made in an inappropriate style that mocks the artificiality of these spaces. Similarly, much of the humour around a character such as Trimalchio is that the displays that suggest he is part of the group are shown to be artifice. He wears a purple stripe on his napkin emulating the dress of the senatorial class in a way that reduces the status so much it becomes humorous and his attempts to show that he has the typical education of the social elite, versed in Greek myth and philosophy, are riddled with confusion. Not only are these *faux pas* humorous because they are full of incongruity and could be laughed at from a superior perspective, they also highlight the pretentiousness both of Trimalchio in his attempts to seem elite and of elite practices which create social rituals in order to maintain a hierarchy and ideal of Roman culture as well. In fact, we have seen that elite culture is riddled with artifice, from the conceptualisation of Priapus as an old Italic god to creating wilderness in small urban gardens, and the position of freedmen as outsiders lampoons artificially constructed traditions.

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<sup>323</sup> I will not cover the discussions and evidence relating to the Vettii here but Hackworth Petersen 2006: 5-6 can be consulted for a good overview.

<sup>324</sup> Hackworth Petersen 2006 provides a detailed study of freedman art. She strongly criticises the use of elite sources such as the *Satyricon* calling it 'Trimalchio vision'. However, if used with caution, I feel a combination of elite literary sources with images from the House of the Vettii can reveal much about the perception of freedmen.

On the other hand, the fresco from the doorway of the house is not only humorous in its own right as a witty depiction of Roman preoccupations with prosperity, but it has also become emblematic of the criticisms levelled at freedmen in both ancient and modern texts for being vulgar and crass. This treatment bears some similarity to the distinctions drawn between urban sophistication and rustic bawdiness discussed earlier but here the situation is even more ambiguous as freedmen are clearly appropriating the visual language of the elites to express their own status, rather than the elites modifying their own language to mock rural simplicity. Trimalchio is, once again, representative of the extreme of this situation, mocked for using elite styles to represent the 'wrong' subjects in the 'wrong' spaces such as gladiatorial combat in the main rooms of the house. Priapus' rustic characteristics and ambiguous status were clearly associated with freedmen by Roman elites and this made him an ideal lens through which they could explore their ideals of status and taste. Social elites were increasingly concerned by freedmen (and new citizens from the reaches of the empire) becoming wealthy and powerful.<sup>325</sup> Visual and literary culture was an effective way to create distance from them and to emphasise the fact that they could not successfully become 'Roman' but it was also the easiest way for these groups of 'others' to look 'Roman'. Their attempts are repeatedly mocked in literature as a way of establishing a deterrent and laughing at them clearly excludes them from the elite social status.

The fresco from the doorway has also captured the attention of scholars since it was discovered, many of whom have used Trimalchio as a model to understand it and they have therefore come to believe that the elite satire of the freedman bears some resemblance to reality. For example, Clarke identifies the image of Priapus in the doorway as a symbol of the superstition and greed of the Vettii which he relates to their social status as freedmen, even though, as we have seen, this fresco, like many of the others in the house, is actually very skilfully composed and shows a high level of intelligence.<sup>326</sup> He further claims that using the Trimalchio model 'would characterise the Vettii as entrepreneurs with a strong, perhaps superstitious interest in the gods of fertility and industry.'<sup>327</sup> This falls into a trap of taking the character of Trimalchio as a realistic representation of a freedman. Because of this opinion, Clarke makes several unfounded judgements about the Vettii, such as they

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<sup>325</sup> Hartnett 2017: 16 describes the former slaves and their offspring as a 'financially powerful and socially striving segment of the population.' This makes it easy to understand the concerns of the existing elite in defining their own place in society.

<sup>326</sup> Clarke 1991: 234 Clarke does admit there is some merit in the art of the house but allays this by suggesting the owners may have hired a professional iconographer.

<sup>327</sup> Clarke 1991: 234.

had a 'nouveau-riche mentality' and they 'attempted to pack as many allusions to the world of aristocratic culture within its [the house] modest area.'<sup>328</sup> Comparison to elite domestic decoration suggests that similar styles were used and shows no evidence of a lack of taste or poor imitation by the Vettii.<sup>329</sup> In fact, it demonstrates that the Roman world had a common visual culture leveraged by many different groups in society to stake a claim in society or to try to exclude others. The image of Priapus plays an important part in these value judgements of the Vettii. Not only are we today influenced by the Roman characterisation of a primitive bawdy god but we are also, as we explored in Chapter One, predisposed by previous scholarship, especially of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, to see Priapus' image as debauched and uncouth. Therefore, modern scholars tend easily to accept the characterisation of the Vettii as lacking in taste and as up-start imposters in Roman society. In many ways we are still today laughing at the Vettii, showing superiority over people maligned for centuries as of 'low' status.

## Conclusion

Like fertility, apotropaism may seem like an obvious function of images of Priapus and many have accepted that without question, but few have looked at how this works or why it is the case. We have seen that the nuances of Priapus' image, in fact, make him an apotropaic figure par excellence; both powerful and adaptable. The humour embedded in images of Priapus has shown that the contradictions and tensions inherent in his character were used to explore Roman cultural ambiguities. A variety of literary sources also deal with important cultural themes through humour but, most significantly, both the *Priapea* and *Satyricon* use the tensions of the character of Priapus to explore them in depth.

The House of the Vettii provides a key space to explore many of these themes as its decoration ranges from a multitude of apotropaic images, specifically Priapus and hermaphrodites, displays of wealth that question Roman concepts of taste and an ostensibly male programme of decoration with the phallus playing a significant role. The infamous image in the doorway of the House of the Vettii exemplifies the main themes of Roman humour: sex, food and money. These three themes are used in a variety of ways both to bolster and parody elite Roman culture and to explore the power

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<sup>328</sup> Clarke 1991: 208-210.

<sup>329</sup> Clarke 1991 is not alone in these opinions about the Vettii, however, as he has written on the subjects multiple times he provides a good case study of how the humour in the *Satyricon* has influenced modern opinions of the image of Priapus.



dynamics which keep everyone in their place in society. However, the House of the Vettii belonged to freedmen, suggesting that the language of the elites became a significant part of displaying *romanitas* across social groups.

Freedmen were both part of and outside of the citizen body which may explain their strong relevance to Petronius, whilst neither a lowly slave nor a free born citizen they exemplify the tensions between high and low in Roman society just like the figure of Priapus. This awkward incongruity creates humour whilst a sense of superiority adds to the impetus to laugh at their status but there is also an element of nervous relief in this laughter since they do pose a threat. The image of Priapus was clearly a way to represent not only the ambiguity of freedman status in Roman society but also a way to represent them as unsophisticated, unintelligent and un-Roman and thus less of a danger to the status quo. However, we also see that freedmen adopt the image of Priapus to represent their own claims to be part of Roman culture.

Both the humour and apotropaism of the image of Priapus are related to his overt masculinity. The protective images and those that reflect the social status of the elite class emphasise the visual force of the phallus through a variety of mechanisms including drapery, pose and/or humour. Thus, we see that the aggressive, confrontational and phallic nature of the images is very important to protect individuals and to create a humour against those that do not fit this ideal. In all of our examples we have also seen that an element of ambiguity characterises the image of Priapus and the fact that nothing is as it first seems in these images make them funny, sophisticated and powerful apotropaia. Ambiguity both mitigates and emphasises the dangers around the figure of Priapus and creates a space in which complex discourses around ethnicity, class and masculinity can be explored. Masculinity is also significant in the role that Priapus' image plays in Roman conceptions of sex, lust and eroticism. We will turn to this in the next chapter.

## Chapter Three: Luxury and Eroticism

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**Figure 54:** Silver 'Vicarello Goblet'. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE-1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Cleveland, Museum of Art.  
Photo: [www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371) [accessed 15/04/18].

The Vicarello Goblet in the Cleveland Museum of Arts is an Augustan silver cup of exquisite quality. (Figure 54). It was found at the springs at Aquae Apollinares, modern Vicarello, and is decorated in a Hellenistic style with several high relief Bacchic figures. Priapus, draped in a panther skin, sits on top of a column surrounded by a rustic shrine; he seems to have come to life with the touch of a maenad but remains fixed to his column. The rustic scene is set by the presence of trees and rocks, even the ground is deliberately rendered as uneven but his column is elaborately carved and there are many fine vessels around the shrine that may have been used to pour libations to the god. The maenad alongside Priapus is nude, aside from some drapery across her lap, and seated. She is touching his beard as he pours his own libation over his phallus. In contrast, on the other side of the vessel another maenad and a satyr suggest a Bacchic frenzy as they dance around the body of the vase in ecstasy.

The images of Priapus we have considered so far have emphasised his crude nature, whether that be literal crude manufacture or a bawdy humour, and this scene clearly fits the theme of outdoor shrines and archaic forms of worship associated with his representation. On the other hand, the

presence of architectural elements, decorative tableware and even the silver of which the goblet is made suggest an elegance and sumptuousness at odds with the rustic nature of Priapus. It may seem surprising that his image is significant in discourses around luxury, sensuality and effeminacy in the Roman world but, as we have already seen, the image of Priapus was complex and pertinent to a wide variety of cultural debates. This cup shows that his image could be incorporated in opulent scenes depicted on fine objects used in the domestic sphere. Further, it suggests ambiguity in the Roman concept of luxury which sits uncomfortably between the imagined abundance of the countryside, where simple people live by a traditional moral code, and the refinement of the urban centres provided by trade and conquest, often associated with decadence and frivolity in the rhetoric of the late republican and early imperial eras. The mythological luxury of the realm of the gods in many ways combines rusticity with urban wealth, as is the case with the Vicarello Goblet where imported silver and Hellenistic maenads sit within an Italic rural shrine. The image of Priapus particularly represents this ambiguity well because he sits in all of these worlds simultaneously yet never fully belongs to any of them. Although he may seem at odds with the sophisticated ethos of many of the luxury images and objects we will examine in this chapter, the disruption of elegant Hellenistic motifs by a rustic peasant god makes them more appropriate for a Roman audience. As a hard, phallic figure, his inclusion in these scenes reinforces the supremacy of Roman masculinity, political authority and cultural dominance in relation to the soft luxuries of the defeated nations of the empire.

### **Luxury in the Roman World**

Luxury goods in the Roman household could take many forms but most were predominantly focused on conspicuous display and consumption. This reflects a society in which appearances and social standing were of the upmost importance, and integrally tied to one another. Display was fundamental to maintaining social visibility and, therefore, status. Hales calls this a 'contest in visibility' and demonstrates that men could 'make a name for themselves through extravagance'.<sup>330</sup> Roman discourses around luxury reflect this, particularly in the sphere of dining which was a significant social occasion, allowing both hosts and guests to exhibit wealth, education and ancestry.

It is worth pausing briefly to consider a definition of 'luxury' in the context of the Roman world, as it is a term that still carries some negative connotations around issues such as taste and social status,

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<sup>330</sup> Hales 2008: 237.

especially when used to evaluate historical contexts.<sup>331</sup> Christopher Berry identifies four categories for luxury goods all of which are relevant to our discussion: sustenance, shelter, clothing and leisure.<sup>332</sup> Further, he defines luxury as pleasurable refinements that fulfil the basic human needs of these categories, for example everybody needs sustenance but simple bread could satisfy that, it is not necessary to eat a lavishly decorated cake made with imported fruits. Thus, the cake can be considered a luxury.<sup>333</sup> An important aspect of Berry's concept of luxury is that it is fluid; if a good is widely adopted it begins to become a 'societal necessity' and those who wish to own luxuries must find something new.<sup>334</sup> Similarly, there is always scope further to refine existing luxury goods meaning that in order to own luxuries one must always have the latest thing. This definition reflects the significance of luxury in Roman contexts. Wallace-Hadrill has particularly highlighted the fluidity of Roman luxury which allowed lower classes to emulate elites and left elites constantly searching for new ways to represent themselves, and this will be an important theme throughout this chapter.<sup>335</sup> The definition also allows us to consider luxury as relative to social status, something luxurious for a craftsman might not be for a senator but as long as they consider it pleasing and it goes beyond fulfilling a basic need it is a luxury.

We should, however, expand Berry's definition slightly to make it more relevant to Roman culture with some culturally specific observations that do not have the same resonance in modern theories of consumption. Sex should be added to his categories; we need to be aware that in Roman society people were commodities that could easily be purchased, therefore they fit our definition as a good that could be attained in different levels of refinement, the more wealth you had the more likely you were to have sexually desirable slaves and mistresses. Sexual excess and choice of partner was a key part of Roman discourses about luxury and control and ownership of slaves, whether for sex or other servitude, was a luxury available only to the wealthy. As we will see, exoticism was also a significant part of the Roman idea of luxury, partly because of the expense associated with imports but also because, as the dominant force in an empire, foreign goods and influences were specifically associated with power and leadership. In this chapter we will primarily consider luxury goods at the higher end of the social scale, specifically goods that would be rare and/or expensive, as this is

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<sup>331</sup> Silver 2007: 347 cautions against assuming that Roman luxuries were the same as ours.

<sup>332</sup> Berry 1994: 5.

<sup>333</sup> Berry 1994: 11.

<sup>334</sup> Berry 1994: 18.

<sup>335</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 326.

where images of Priapus are most prevalent and where they provide the most insight into social and political changes, and, as is the case with other aspects of Roman society, the evidence, both visual and literary, is more plentiful. We will also see that at the top of the social scale these individual luxuries combined to create a lifestyle defined by its indulgence. As in previous chapters, it is worth noting with reference to access to luxury, that the 'elite' are not necessarily those of the traditional senatorial families but those with wealth and a desire to engage with fashionable tastes. By the early imperial era these people could come from a wide variety of backgrounds.

Many of the materials, objects and motifs of Roman luxury ware will not seem out of step with modern conceptions; precious metals, imported foodstuffs, rich fabrics and exotic decoration are all common in this area.<sup>336</sup> However, in the Roman world a luxury lifestyle was suffused with imagery from a mythological rustic world represented in ways that were heavily reliant on Hellenistic culture. We will briefly survey some examples of different types of luxury in order to show how Priapus was incorporated into this world that blurs Roman tradition and Hellenistic sophistication and to appreciate how *luxuria* touched all aspects of urban material culture.

Sustenance for wealthy Romans included not only perishable goods such as imported foods and wines often incorporated by chefs into elaborate dishes, but also the presentation of edible goods. One of the most important ways for wealthy Romans to display their prosperity was a silver service. As well as being used to serve foods these objects were often displayed in decorative arrangements in dining rooms.<sup>337</sup> A complete dining set was known as a *ministerium* and had vessels for both dining and drinking, even middle class families would strive to own this with the wealthiest amassing large sets with additional show pieces.<sup>338</sup> These pieces were not only made of an expensive material but could be highly decorated demanding great skill from craftsmen, as is the case with the Vicarello Goblet. Silver was also used for cosmetic objects such as mirrors and washing bowls in wealthy households (for example, Figure 32). Beyond its value in creating beautiful objects, silver was always of high value from a monetary perspective and therefore we find even decorative pieces tend to

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<sup>336</sup> It is worth noting that there are still some who question luxury from a moral viewpoint today and that this is often tied to an ideal of taste, i.e. luxury in itself is desirable but critique of the choice of goods is used as a tool to dismiss people as 'vulgar' or 'tasteless'. This is also apparent in some modern discussions of Roman luxury.

<sup>337</sup> See Strong 1966, Oliver 2004 and Leader-Newby 2004 for fuller discussions of silver displays.

<sup>338</sup> Strong 1966: 124.



**Figure 55:** Bronze vase with Priapus and shrine. Avenches, Roman Museum.

Photo: <https://www.gettyimages.co.uk/detail/news-photo/small-bronze-vase-with-bacchic-scenes-gallo-roman-news-photo/182126219#/small-bronze-vase-with-bacchic-scenes-gallo-roman-civilisation-muse-picture-id182126219> [accessed 17/05/14].

adhere to standard weights and carry stamps with their weight or value.<sup>339</sup> This made silverware a useful investment as well as an obvious display of wealth; in fact, excavators found many of those trapped as they attempted to flee Pompeii carried silver services as well as coins and jewellery.<sup>340</sup>

Appearances were of the utmost importance in the Roman world and were considered an indication of character. Therefore, clothing and personal adornments were refined into luxuries in many ways. Individuals expressed their identity through their luxuries and so, although imported goods were often condemned as effeminising especially those relating to appearance, they were a significant element of defining Roman masculinity.<sup>341</sup> Silver was not the only precious metal imported into Rome, nor was it used exclusively for household objects, silver and gold jewellery along with precious gemstones were a popular way to display wealth for both women and men especially in public places.<sup>342</sup> We have already seen in previous chapters that Priapus was a popular motif on decorated gems which could be highly personal objects revealing something of the owner's identity through their choice of motif or deity. The owner could further reveal wealth and status through the

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<sup>339</sup> Leader-Newby 2004: 2.

<sup>340</sup> For example, according to Mattusch 2008: 117, the mirror with the fishing erotes (Figure 32) was found with four silver cups, sixty-one gold coins and fifty-one silver coins.

<sup>341</sup> Hackworth Petersen 2009: 182 emphasises that the body and its adornment could be a site for expressing social status.

<sup>342</sup> See Lapatin 2015 for detailed discussion of imported metals and gems.

choice of stone, the quality of the carving and the value of the setting.<sup>343</sup> Imported and richly coloured fabrics were also used as ostentatious displays of luxury in public and private spaces as clothing or as drapes for interior rooms and heavy imported perfumes were used in a similar way, both as incense and personal fragrances. The high value of imported goods such as perfumes was highlighted by their ornamental containers, for example a bronze vessel found in Avenches, Switzerland shows Priapus on top of a column as part of a scene of rural shrines with several worshippers (Figure 55). The shape suggests it contained perfumes and it is covered in detailed decoration, including an abundance of silver inlay vine leaves around the neck on the bottle. Such objects show expensive goods were often decorated with rustic imagery related to the timeless mythological world of the gods we encountered in Chapter One. They also suggest that Roman luxuries, and the associated imagery, were widespread throughout the empire.

When it comes to shelter, luxury can take two forms, although they often appear in the same properties; the architecture of the house, including size and building materials, and the decoration of walls and floors. The size of a house does not necessarily directly correlate to wealth but Vitruvius, writing about architectural ideals in the late first century BCE, states that elites need large houses to perform public functions and the evidence from Pompeii suggests that this was true in practice with some houses providing large spacious rooms and open areas such as peristyles for inhabitants and guests.<sup>344</sup> Marble, other expensive building materials and water features could also be used to add to the opulence of a dwelling. Not only did such additions display wealth they also created an environment suitable for leisure and entertaining. Larger houses are also usually the most richly decorated with mosaics and wall painting, unfortunately little furniture remains but there are some pieces that suggest it was a key part of the display in wealthy households.<sup>345</sup> One could display taste, refinement, education and wealth through the choice of wall painting or decoration of household objects; mythological paintings in particular seem to have been used in domestic spaces to display personal prestige.<sup>346</sup>

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<sup>343</sup> Richter 1956 xx-xxi.

<sup>344</sup> Vitruvius. *De arch.* 6.5, also see 6.3.7-8 for details of appropriate proportions of peristyles and *triclinia*.

<sup>345</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1990: 172-173.

<sup>346</sup> Newby 2016.



**Figure 56:** Marble krater showing the visit of Bacchus. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museums.  
Photo: Euan Martin.

Berry's definition of leisure is broad and includes all entertainment as well as activities such as dancing and sports.<sup>347</sup> We could therefore argue that domestic activities such as dining and bathing were in themselves a form of leisure and the time and effort allowed for them makes them luxurious on different levels.<sup>348</sup> We also know from our literary sources that entertainment frequently featured within the home, dancing and singing were common at dinner and the wealthiest hired, or bought as slaves, professional poets, musicians and even acrobats to entertain their guests.<sup>349</sup> The decoration of some dining vessels show singing, music making and dancing in the form of Bacchic revelry but it is likely that these mythological scenes reflect, at least to some extent, the activities that may have taken place in the household. For example, a large marble *krater* in the Hermitage that replicates the famous 'Bacchus visits a poet' scene found replicated across the Roman world, including in the Vatican base (Figure 16). This decoration shows Priapus watching a drunken Bacchus followed by a procession of a woman, so drunk she is being supported, and satyrs playing the *aulos* or dancing (Figure 56). The *thiasos* are shown visiting diners who are reclining on a couch (much in the same way as diners are depicted in Pompeian frescoes) as they welcome the god into their celebrations. Although this is clearly a mythological scene it does suggest that such behaviour was expected as part of dining experiences where intoxication in honour of Bacchus could lead to dancing and merrymaking. Priapus, in this scene, contrasts with the soft, drunken bodies and acts as a reminder of the other outcome of drunkenness: lust.

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<sup>347</sup> Berry 1994: 5.

<sup>348</sup> For detailed account of bathing as a Roman leisure activity see Yegul 2010.

<sup>349</sup> D'Arms 1999.



## Luxury and Morality

From Cato the Elder writing in the second century BCE, through Pliny the Elder writing in the first century CE, to Juvenal writing in the late first and early second century CE, Roman writers dedicated much time to moralising about *luxuria* and its perceived harm to society. In many respects the rhetoric is consistent across time. The most upstanding lifestyle was always located in the past and associated with a simple rural life, then a foreign influence is introduced and Romans are swept up in a new world of luxury which leads to a decline in manliness and morals. This fits with the context we examined in Chapter One in which Priapus is shown in deliberately antiquated rustic settings which glorify the idea of the past over the realities of the present. Different dates and influences are offered for the beginning of Rome's problems with luxury depending on the source, for example Pliny chooses 189 BCE when Scipio brought 1400 pounds of silver and 1500 pounds of gold to Rome, whereas Sallust pinpoints Sulla's looting in Asia.<sup>350</sup> Writers as temporally distant Cato and Seneca both wrote, at different times and in different political contexts, at length about the problems luxury could bring and what a 'Roman' should and should not do. Throughout this chapter we shall touch upon some of this moralising work along with courtroom oratory where *mores* were tested in public cases.<sup>351</sup> Like the other chapters, the focus here is primarily the late republic and early imperial period, as this is the time at which Priapus was most prevalent and his image in luxury contexts reflects social changes, however, we will touch upon some later material to demonstrate how pervasive the visual language of luxury becomes in a variety of contexts. These moralising sources can mislead, as many opponents of luxury in fact lived a lifestyle that would be considered sumptuous, therefore we should view them as rhetoric rather than as a reflection of reality, a theme we will pick up later in this chapter. However, these texts do provide useful insight into some of the ways in which money may have been spent and how this was viewed by some, but we will not use these texts to make judgements about the lifestyles of some Romans or the origins of luxurious goods and ideas.<sup>352</sup> We will also engage with contemporary poetry, particularly elegy, to understand some of the more positive views of *luxuria*. Images of Priapus in these contexts are a constant

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<sup>350</sup> Sall. *Cat.* 11-12; Plin. *HN.* 33.53.148.

<sup>351</sup> There were many attempts to curb luxury through legislation, see Marshall 2008.

<sup>352</sup> It has even been suggested that the sparse lifestyle advocated by some philosophers and moralists was in itself a form of self-indulgence as it was a choice rather than necessity and they could choose which parts of the lifestyle to adhere to. Satire mocks this as much as it attacks indulgence. For example, in Lucian's Symposium (Lucian. *Symp.* 13) a guest attends dinner and eats, drinks and enjoys the entertainment but declares using a chair or couch too decadent. Barton 1995: 756 discusses asceticism as a form of indulgence for the wealthy.

reminder of the ambiguity of luxury which is condemned by moralists and blamed on the east but at the same time is a central part of competitive Roman society and used by men of all social groups to assert status.<sup>353</sup>

The focus of this chapter will remain visual representations and, therefore, we are more concerned with the imaginary landscapes and luxurious materials that were used to create an impression of luxury. Like many other areas of Roman society in which Priapus plays a part, luxury has been viewed through the lens of a Christian morality which, using some of the works of Roman moralists, has condemned it as a damaging Hellenistic influence or pagan weakness that unchecked led to a decline in standards and eventually the fall of the empire. This perspective is contemporary to the reactions towards Roman sexual imagery that we examined in Chapter One and in this way sex and luxury are both seen as part of a damaging 'decadence.' This point of view is typical of influential work of the era such as Gibbon's *The History of the Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* which states in the opening paragraph that inhabitants of the Roman empire 'enjoyed and abused the advantages of wealth and luxury,' and it has had a lasting influence.<sup>354</sup> This echoes the eighteenth and nineteenth century comments we explored in Chapter One, for example Wright's denunciation of the 'unbounded licence and depravity' of the Romans and suggests that conceptually luxury has often been linked to perceived low morality in all things, especially sexual behaviour.<sup>355</sup>

There has also been a longstanding tendency to value large and public artworks over domestic objects, often dismissing them as 'minor' or 'decorative'. As recently as 1963 Cornelius Vermeule said it was 'dangerous' to read too much into 'decorative arts'.<sup>356</sup> In the past it has been common to catalogue so called 'minor arts' but not to offer detailed analysis of them. Images of Priapus in such decoration have been significantly undervalued because of this. As we have seen in Chapter One, the approach to images of Priapus has also offered little vigorous study and Herter's 1932 catalogue remains the seminal piece of work on this important figure.<sup>357</sup> For many years, the combination of moralistic approaches and a lack of attentiveness to domestic objects led to little insightful study into how luxury goods and the discourse around them played a part in Roman society. More

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<sup>353</sup> Hales 2008: 249 emphasises the competitive nature of society, she says that nearly all accusations of luxury come from those afraid to lose out to peers or social inferiors.

<sup>354</sup> Gibbon 1994: 1. See Edwards 1993: 1-33 for a fuller account of the problems with the influence of eighteenth and nineteenth century conservatism on the study of Roman morality.

<sup>355</sup> Wright 1865: 155.

<sup>356</sup> Vermeule 1963: 33.

<sup>357</sup> Herter 1932.

recently, scholars have begun to reassess extravagance as part of the discourse of Roman identity and specifically the ways in which strata of society interacted and defined themselves through display. Edwards, for example, highlights the way in which luxury and morality were part of the way in which elite Romans thought about themselves in relation to outsiders and the state.<sup>358</sup> Others, such as Bowditch, have viewed luxury from the perspective of literature, examining the presence of luxury goods in elegy as a tension between ideal rusticity and exotic romance.<sup>359</sup> The image of Priapus significantly contributes to this discourse as a figure who transcends societal boundaries and simultaneously represents both luxurious otherworldliness and rustic simplicity. This is seen in many silver objects, such as the Vicarello Goblet, where shrines and rusticity are emphasised alongside beautiful drapery, nude bodies and objects.

A first century BCE silver cup, that we looked at in Chapter Two, provides an unusual perspective by depicting a scene of fishermen and peasant piety at a shrine of Priapus (Figure 31). Although sacrifice scenes such as this are common in other media it is highly unusual to find a 'realistic' scene like this on silver tableware. It may suggest a strong interest in traditional *romanitas* on the part of the patron or it may serve as a reminder to guests of the reality of the origins of their meal rather than the fantasy mythological associations of dining, much like the still life paintings that decorated Pompeiian *triclinia*. On the other hand, it may ask the educated guest to draw upon their knowledge of literature and recognise that Priapus is associated with the protection of sailors in the *Palatine Anthology* or to recognise it as part of the fantasy world of rustic piety constructed in contemporary images and associated with Hellenism. By looking at luxury domestic objects from the perspective of Priapus' inclusion in their decoration we can begin to see how his ambiguity allowed elite Roman men to use him to define their place in society, and the wider empire, through their luxury goods, and allowed those who were wealthy newcomers to emulate the styles of the traditional social elite.

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<sup>358</sup> Edwards 1993: 2.

<sup>359</sup> Bowditch 2006.

## Priapus and *Convivia*

The whole ceiling parted asunder, and an enormous hoop, apparently knocked out of a giant cask, was let down. All around it were hung golden crowns and alabaster boxes of perfumes. We were asked to take these presents for ourselves, when I looked back at the table....

A dish with some cakes on it had now been put there, a Priapus made by the confectioner standing in the middle, holding up every kind of fruit and grapes in his wide apron in the conventional style. We reached greedily after his treasures, and a sudden start to the games renewed our merriment. All the cakes and all the fruits, however lightly they were touched proceeded to spurt out saffron and the nasty juice flew even into our faces. We thought it must be a sacred dish that was anointed with such holy appointments and we all stood straight up and cried "the gods bless Augustus, the father of his county." But as some people even after this solemnity snatched at the fruit, we filled our napkins too with them, myself especially, for I thought that I could never fill Giton's lap with a large enough present.<sup>360</sup>

We have looked at some of this passage in earlier chapters but it is worth reconsidering from the perspective of luxury and at greater length as it gives an insight into how and why the image of Priapus is a useful tool for understanding the depth of discourses around luxury in Roman society. Trimalchio's dinner in the *Satyricon* is perhaps the most infamous satire on luxury, stupidity and vice. As we will see, the dinner party or *convivium* was a central part of displaying luxury in the Roman world.<sup>361</sup>

This passage illustrates several themes that will be important throughout this chapter, including; dining and display, rusticity and abundance and Priapus as an active or disruptive figure. The passage is taken from mid-way through the dinner and, therefore, the reader has already been introduced to the theatricality of the meal, however, even in this short excerpt the drama and luxury pervade

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<sup>360</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 2.9.60. Trans. Heseltine 1969.

<sup>361</sup> Rankin 1965: 89, shows that Petronius was considered to be an expert on luxuries in Roman literature.

throughout. From the opening of the ceiling come luxurious gifts of gold crowns and perfumes for the guests, which are followed by luxury food in the form of cakes and fruits.<sup>362</sup> The mention of a ‘confectioner’ not only suggests an elaborate sweet statue of Priapus but also that Trimalchio probably has specialist cooks working on the meal.

The most significant parts of the passage for our purposes are those which describe the Priapus and the way in which it sprays saffron at the guests. This is a good example of a Priapus image in a refined context that is out of place and even ‘acts badly’, surprising the guests and disrupting the meal. We shall examine this attribute of Priapus in luxury settings throughout this chapter, but it is important to note that his image is so associated with Roman *mores* and traditional religiosity that the guests stop in their tracks to make a religious declaration. This may reflect the common association of Priapus with piety that we have seen in Chapter One, or it could be a joke at the expense of the emperors to link the figure of Priapus with such a dedication. All of this is a highly theatrical display and the use of saffron further emphasises this to the Roman audience who would be aware that the stage in the theatre was sprinkled with saffron.<sup>363</sup> Saffron is also an expensive, and imported, good and the fact that even this cake version is carrying an abundance of fruits reminds us of Priapus’ association with fertility; an appropriate concept to evoke at dinner. Interestingly, despite the initial reverence shown towards Priapus, the guests display behaviour typically condemned by moralists; they greedily take all they can and Encolpius even does so in order to seduce a boy, which is a specific hallmark of luxury in imagery, poetry and moralising texts. The luxury goods in this passage resemble those discussed earlier in this chapter; perfumes, precious metals and edible delicacies, all of which were associated with effeminacy in Roman literature.

The Priapus in this passage is made of an unspecific material but presumably a foodstuff. He seems to be a firm statue-like image in the *anasyrma* pose that squirts a soft liquid over everyone. Luxury was particularly associated with fluids and softness and Priapus’ rigidity is often out of place in luxury contexts. Indulgence of any kind was thought to sap a man’s strength and make him ‘soft’ and many aspects of luxurious, mythological worlds reflect this rather than try to contradict it. Men should be dry and hard so that they can carry out their political duties but women, on the other hand, are wet and soft. Therefore, indulgence in bodily pleasures which is associated with bodily

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<sup>362</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 2.9.60; see also Beacham 2013 for discussion of the use of theatrical effects at dinner.

<sup>363</sup> Mart. *Ep.* 5.25; also see Jones 1991 for a discussion of ‘dinner theatre’.

fluids is 'womanish'.<sup>364</sup> Visual representations of 'luxury' often focus on things considered 'effeminate' in Roman contexts and the dress, landscapes and bodies are also represented as correspondingly 'soft'. This is not as clear a dichotomy as it may seem; although the emphasis is on softness in these images we should remember they are still made for male viewers and Priapus is rarely soft in them. In fact, Priapus' 'hardness' reflects the phallic male privilege at the heart of these images.

Also significant in this passage is the fact that Priapus 'acts'. In this case, it is part of a clever prank organised as entertainment but high end, luxury objects with mythological embellishments, especially decoration associated with Bacchus and Venus, offer rare examples of Priapus' herm as able to take part in the action. Usually, he is still fixed to a plinth without legs but his top half is able to move, as we have seen in the Vicarello Goblet. This suggests there is something about these contexts that give him more agency than his usual representation as a crudely carved herm.

### Drinking and Dining

A drinking cup in Boston places Priapus in a world of symbolism and fantasy clearly designed to suggest luxury and leisure to the diner (Figure 57). In this instance, as on the Vicarello Goblet, Priapus, although a herm, is animated from the waist up suggesting that even he is invigorated by the revelry. The cup has a herm of a bearded and capped Priapus, now missing his phallus, at the centre of a scene in which trees are draped with luxurious fabric to create an outdoor shrine. Erotes or children carry goats and hens, presumably to sacrifice, and several tables and pillars are laden with theatrical masks (in fact, masks are so abundant some even lie on the ground) and fine silver vessels.<sup>365</sup> This is a hedonistic world filled with motifs associated with rustic cults to Bacchus and the abundance that goes with that. In this case Priapus, along with the other herm of a satyr, is a clear indicator of this realm. The style of the decoration on this cup is distinctly Hellenistic and many of the motifs are from a Hellenistic repertoire. A very similar scene is found on another silver cup in Princeton, the inclusion of a bust of Alexander the Great on it further associates the tableaux on these cups with Hellenistic art and lifestyles, idealised by many Romans as the foundation of *otium* (Figure 58). The Ptolemy Cup from Alexandria has similar decorative motifs and further reinforces the idea that these Hellenistic motifs were widespread and associated with the Hellenistic world.

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<sup>364</sup> Edwards 1993: 63-97.

<sup>365</sup> Beacham 2013.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 57:** Silver *skyphos*. 1-30 CE. Boston, Museum of Fine Arts.

Photo: [www.mfa.org/collections/object/two-handles-cup-skypos-with-bacchic-scene-45948](http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/two-handles-cup-skypos-with-bacchic-scene-45948) [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 58:** Silver cup. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Princeton, University Art Museum.

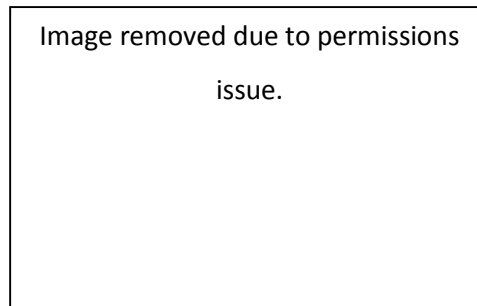
Photo: [www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/38924](http://www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/38924) [accessed 15/04/18].

It is a cameo cup carved from onyx, so it also serves as a reminder that silver was not the only expensive material available for these luxury goods (Figure 59).<sup>366</sup> The distant world depicted on these cups, and other luxury goods, is that of Bacchus and Venus and it is used extensively in private contexts to display the taste and sophistication of the patron. It also provides an immersive experience that is distinguished from the more formal public sphere through sensuous Hellenistic styles and motifs.

Roman luxury was about more than just objects, it was about experience. Like the immersive scenes of a luxurious world found on these silver cups and the packed scene on the Ptolemy Cup which seems to include every possible motif in a small space, luxury was a synaesthetic experience in which people could lose themselves. We therefore encounter banquets where the entertainment, incense,

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<sup>366</sup> Van de Grift 1984: 13 notes that wine vessels could be made from a variety of materials but all were related to Bacchic imagery.



**Figure 59:** Onyx 'Ptolemy Cup'. 1st Century BCE - 1st Century CE. Paris, National Library France.

Photo:  
[http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collect?vc=ePkH4LF7ZZbbbcNADARbYQniU2QXbsJ\\_CRIgacp1uLEMA9gw4l-FdNy5pSQc7vR2PNkeTy8f8Lmw7VSx05BLmng1t4ESFToRtQZrsH](http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collect?vc=ePkH4LF7ZZbbbcNADARbYQniU2QXbsJ_CRIgacp1uLEMA9gw4l-FdNy5pSQc7vR2PNkeTy8f8Lmw7VSx05BLmng1t4ESFToRtQZrsH) [accessed 15/04/18].

slaves, table ware and decoration are as notable as the food itself. Luxury was more than a few specific goods or practices, it infused all aspects of private (and to a large extent public) life for those who had the time and wealth to enjoy it. We have suggested that luxury usually relates to bodily desires, therefore it is also highly sensory in nature; good food, plenty of drinking, sex with attractive people, perfumes and fine fabrics all infused with exoticism. All of these elements were frequently brought together at the *convivium* or dinner party. As we have seen in the passage from the *Satyricon* with the Priapus cake, the *convivium* could be a microcosm in which issues around luxury, display and social status played out with a high degree of exoticism and theatricality. Although it represents a fictional banquet, when combined with other sources about Roman private dining we can begin to build a picture of lavish affairs with plentiful food and entertainment, where men employed luxury not only for the sake of indulgence but to project their social status and wealth. For this reason dining will provide the primary context for the rest of this chapter. It will allow us to consider images of Priapus in a setting that combined social ritual and discourse with luxury, theatre and mythology.

The *convivium* was clearly designed to stimulate all of the senses simultaneously, in the same way as the garden settings we briefly explored in Chapter Two. As we have seen, Priapus' image was strongly associated with the experience of the garden and also connected it to dining; in Chapter One we explored this association through the painting on the pillar of the *triclinium* of House II.9.1 at Pompeii which depicts Priapus in *anasyrma* pose on one wall, Bacchus on another facing the garden and horns of plenty on a third facing the dining room (Figure 60). Significantly, this pillar is situated on a low wall which allows diners to also enjoy the garden. Conquest of the Mediterranean allowed





**Figure 60:** Bacchus and horn of plenty painting from House II.9.1 at Pompeii.

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

social dining to become increasingly opulent and an elite reliant upon support from their peers competed with new delicacies from the far-flung reaches of the empire.

Cicero, writing in the first century BCE, describes dining in this way:

Men of taste and refinement whose excellent chefs and confectioners serve up fish, birds , game, all of the finest quality, who enjoy ‘wine decanted from a newly opened cask’ ...together with games and those matters which come afterwards....There are good looking boys; too, to serve at table. And the linens, silverware, Corinthian bronze, indeed the setting itself and the house – all these are correspondingly fine.<sup>367</sup>

Cicero’s description comes from the late republic and the lavishness of *convivia* only increased under the emperors, as displaying status became an activity for the private sphere. Fine dining suggested confidence in the empire and the new opportunities it brought. This is not only expressed through the exotic food but also by the imported architectural styles that made up the peristyles, the flowing water brought about by new technologies and the varied entertainment. This makes it an important context for us to look at Priapus who was so strongly associated with the idea of tradition but also with Roman masculine superiority and status.

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<sup>367</sup> Cic. *Fin.* 2.23. Trans. Rackham 1914.

Banquets played upon the idea of an immersive experience that transported guests into the world of the gods, but some extravagant occasions took this even further. Famously, the caves at Sperlonga placed guests in an atmospheric re-enactment of the *Odyssey* and Varro tells us of Hortensius who had an actor play Orpheus and had animals attend him at his banquets.<sup>368</sup> Such effects may also have influenced the choice of objects and scenes used in smaller urban dining rooms. Although scenes from mythology are not directly recreated they can be represented either on walls or through sculptural assemblages of gardens.<sup>369</sup> Perhaps once combined with music, perfume and, above all, wine these decorative motifs contributed to a sense for the diners that beyond the politicking of the occasion they had managed to find themselves in a part of paradise in the *convivium*. In some cases, the scene may have been set before even entering the house, as the apotropaic images we examined in Chapter Two located near doorways may have had a further function of setting the scene for indulgence and luxury. The doorway of II.1.12 at Pompeii, for example, features paintings of Priapus in an *anasyrma* pose, Bacchus and Mercury and Venus rising from the sea mirror in hand (Figure 61). The combination of these figures suggests a world of prosperity, virility and beauty. Guests to this building must surely have had a sense of the luxury experience to come firmly in mind from the outset of their visit.

The flamboyant cups associated with luxury dining also suggest that drinking was a very important element of the *convivium*. In fact, most of the frescoes that show dinner parties show people drinking rather than eating, for example the frescoes from the House of the Chaste Lovers (IX.12.16, Figure 62), and wine features heavily in many moralists' complaints about luxury; it was particularly condemned as a luxury item as people began to import wine, especially from Greece and it was thought to lead to many of the other dangerous vices such as dancing and sex.<sup>370</sup> These 'vices' are apparent in the visual imagery of luxury ware that feature Priapus; we see in the Hermitage vase, for example, a woman so drunk that she has to be held up by a satyr and the figures on the Vicarello Goblet dance with Bacchic abandon. Cups also appeal to the desire to interact with luxury in a tactile sense as they could be handled and admired closely, Stansbury-O'Donnell suggests there is something innate in the desire to touch beautiful things and Lapatin emphasises that in the Roman

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<sup>368</sup> Varro. *Rust.* 3.13; Newby 2016: 81.

<sup>369</sup> See Newby 2012 for a discussion of large sculptural assemblages as immersive experiences.

<sup>370</sup> Roberts 2013: 241; On wine and drunkenness in particular see D'Arms 2010 and Commager 1957.



**Figure 61:** Doorway of House II.1.12 at Pompeii.

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

world many luxury objects were specifically designed to be held and inspected closely in an intimate setting which makes them a significant part of the synaesthetic experience of luxury.<sup>371</sup>

As the patron deity of drinking and loss of control, the world of Bacchus conveniently reflects the bodily desires associated with luxury and the images of a hedonistic Bacchic landscape (to which we will return in Chapter Four) are frequently paired with the experiences of dining and drinking. Venus too is highly relevant to this domestic world of dining and luxury, her associations with sexual desire and indulgence in vanities make her an important deity for those at the *convivium* and those committed to luxury in a wider sense.<sup>372</sup> In using these images the Romans borrowed heavily from Hellenistic iconography as we have seen in both the Vicarello Goblet and the cup from Boston, however, once in the Roman repertoire the standard motifs of Hellenistic art become saturated with the complexities of defining Roman ideals, masculinity and control. Priapus is a figure at the heart of such discourses.

### Status and Dining

As dining was inextricably associated with the display of masculinity and status it was, inevitably, the site of much tension in rhetoric and literature. Although social dining was an essential part of being a member of Roman society there was much criticism of anyone seen to overstep a line demarcating what was reasonable luxury for their social standing. Of course this 'line' was in constant flux and defined by popular opinion rather than any concrete rules. Dining was problematic as the *convivium* brought several luxuries, or vices depending on your perspective, together into one setting and,

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<sup>371</sup> Stansbury-O'Donnell 2014: 41; Lapatin 2015: 5.

<sup>372</sup> Yardley 1991: 151 says that banquets were especially associated with adultery in Roman literature which firmly places them in the realm of Venus.

therefore, held the potential for excess and loss of control. The banquet was associated with gluttony, over spending, sexual indulgence, effeminacy and dancing, which as Corbeill points out, were particularly linked to drunkenness and sex.<sup>373</sup> It is common for the banquet to be used as a symbol of the tyranny of a bad emperor, for example Nero was said to use it to indulge his vices and was so extravagant he invented a dish that involved boiling water only to cool it down again with snow, the pointlessness of this process exemplified Nero's wasteful extravagance, or at least the perception of it.<sup>374</sup> Therefore, dining provides us with an important context to look at the era in which the Roman elite adjusted to one man rule.<sup>375</sup>

Much of the concept of Roman masculinity was based around being in control and it was essential as a means of showing superiority over women, slaves and foreigners. Often the masculine element of this dominance was symbolised by the aggressive phallic nature of Priapus who is simultaneously always in the position of power and always at risk of losing that position. Priapus could be symbolic here, as a visual representation of excess in both sexual potency and sexual aggression. However, it is this aggressive masculinity that keeps Roman Priapus from becoming too 'foreign' or 'soft'; it asserts his power. Satire and political invective frequently link one excess or vice with all others and further use these examples of indulgence to suggest unsuitability for public office.

Dining, although it seems to be focused on constructing an extravagant experience away from everyday reality, was primarily used to reinstate existing hierarchies; perhaps symbolised by the way the image of Priapus is firmly rooted to the ground. Therefore, seating was carefully arranged and positions pre-assigned and it was even possible to give different food to guests. Martial in *Epigram* 3.60, for example, complains:

Seeing that I am invited to dinner, and am no longer, as before, to  
be bought, why is not the same dinner given to me, as to you? You  
partake of oysters fattened in the Lucrine lake; I tear my lips in  
sucking at a limpet. Before you are placed splendid mushrooms; I  
help myself to such as are fit only for pigs.<sup>376</sup>

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<sup>373</sup> Corbeill 1997 105-6.

<sup>374</sup> Goddard 1994: 72. Also note that Trimachio's guests have their hands washed with snow water (Petron. *Sat.* 2.5.31). Snow seems to have been a literary trope indicating luxury extravagance.

<sup>375</sup> Vout 2007 discusses the relationship between emperors and luxuries.

<sup>376</sup> Mart. *Epigrams* 3.60.1-6. Trans. Nisbet 2015.



**Figure 62:** Banqueting fresco from House of the Chaste Lovers at Pompeii (IX.12.16).

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

This practice suggests that although the guests would primarily be from the same social class there was some diversity of status.<sup>377</sup> This makes the ability to display one's own status within the *convivium* even more relevant and we should assume that opportunities to display social standing were seized upon.

The significant problem with dining as a means of display, from an elite Roman perspective, was that anyone could do it. It allowed everybody with money, including freedmen and foreigners, to participate in an important social function and to do so emulating the luxury practices established by the traditional elites.<sup>378</sup> Although they may seem very exclusive, objects such as the silver cups were in fact an easy way for people of any background to advertise their wealth and cultural erudition, regardless of whether they actually understood the Hellenistic myths and styles as a result of extensive, literary education or had become familiar with the stories from popular entertainments.<sup>379</sup> Nonetheless, Priapus was a significant figure for those wishing to project a self-consciously Roman appearance and it seems likely that in depicting Bacchic banquets and rituals cups such as these were decorated in a way that could be attractive to anyone hosting luxurious events.

Much of the discourse around the social importance of the *convivium* can be summed up by highly decorated silver drinking cups where Priapus is a significant part of the Bacchic decoration, like the

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<sup>377</sup> Hudson 2010 shows that whether all guests shared food or got individual portions changed according to fashions and it could be used to indicate the status of guests.

<sup>378</sup> Hackworth Petersen 2006.

<sup>379</sup> Hall 2008.

examples we looked at earlier in this chapter. They were usually made in complementary pairs that either matched or had slightly different images from the same theme or narrative. These cups were important pieces for discussion and a way for the host and guests to show their taste and cultural knowledge.<sup>380</sup> We can see how the discussion and display of sophistication around these cups may have worked in the *Satyricon* when Trimalchio explains the scenes on some of his silverware:

Myself I have a great passion for silver. I own about a hundred four-gallon cups engraved with Cassandra killing her sons, and the boys were lying there dead – but you would think they were alive. I have a thousand jugs which a patron bequeathed, where you see Daedalus shutting Niobe into the Trojan horse. And I have got the fights between Hermeros and Pertrsites on my cups and every cup is a heavy one for I do not sell my connoisseurship for any money.<sup>381</sup>

Of course, in this case Petronius has set the scene to laugh at Trimalchio by showing how uneducated he actually is, so most of the details he lists are incorrect, but this scene gives us an indication of the function of Hellenising images on silver cups as well as suggesting the threat to the elite's definition of themselves posed by the availability of such objects to anyone with wealth. In a true display of ostentation, at Trimalchio's dinner the silver is discarded and swept out after the courses.<sup>382</sup> This not only shows wealth but also suggests a lack of appreciation of the craftsmanship and mythological decoration, another signal to the reader of his lack of refinement. As with Chapter Two, I am not here buying into common criticisms of freedmen as lacking in taste but rather using the portrayal of them to understand what was considered sophisticated behaviour through descriptions of what they lacked. Priapus shows that to display cultural status it was necessary to be grounded both in traditional Roman *mores* and versed in Hellenistic luxury.

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<sup>380</sup> Leader-Newby 2004: 124 – 173.

<sup>381</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 2.8.52. Trans. Heseltine 1969.

<sup>382</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 2.5.34.



**Figure 63:** Bronze Bacchic Cup. Paris, National Library of France.

Photo:

[http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/21925?vc=ePkH4LF7jZU7DsJADESvsulCxN\\_Yx6Gki7h\\_wTNSliQailGynrez-Wzi3\\_Z00zulTqP6f4Pcf5\\_R13u4vg\\_dZemuyFbosixOHQVKtCNqBVZgZQi\\_8Au\\_8Gv](http://medaillesetantiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/record/21925?vc=ePkH4LF7jZU7DsJADESvsulCxN_Yx6Gki7h_wTNSliQailGynrez-Wzi3_Z00zulTqP6f4Pcf5_R13u4vg_dZemuyFbosixOHQVKtCNqBVZgZQi_8Au_8Gv)  
[accessed 16/04/18].

## Luxury and Roman Power

### Hellenism

Broadly, the Greeks, and the 'east', were blamed for luxury in the moralising rhetoric. We are not concerned in this chapter with whether that was true or whether luxury was a positive or negative influence on Roman culture, but it is important to note that the styles employed in decorating luxury items, and even many of the items themselves, have a distinctive Hellenistic flair to them.<sup>383</sup> We are, however, concerned with how and why 'Greek' styles were employed in representing Roman culture in the social ritual of dining. Specifically, we need to ask how the traditional figure of Priapus sits within this luxury imagery associated with urbanity and sophistication.

We have seen in Chapter One that the Romans were often ambivalent towards Greece. From a Roman perspective, the geographical location of Greece was particularly ambiguous because it was situated between the tough world of Rome and the soft east.<sup>384</sup> This is reflected in some of the attitudes towards Greece which admire its achievements but see it as too heavily influenced by its eastern neighbours. However, Greek culture was undeniably influential in Roman arts and literature particularly because it provided a convenient visual language to represent Roman cultural discourse. Further, as Greek styles became associated with urban sophistication and luxury they could be used to asset intellectual status. As Tim Whitmarsh says: 'certain Romans at certain points in history felt it

<sup>383</sup> There is a large body of work that discusses Hellenistic styles in Roman art; a good starting point for the basic stylistic markers are Pollitt 1986 and Burn 2004.

<sup>384</sup> Whitmarsh 2010: 741.

desirable or even necessary to articulate their identity as Romans by advertising their commitment to Greek values.<sup>385</sup> The adoption and adaptation of Greek styles both shows Rome's power as military conqueror and the heavy influence of Greece which worried some commentators. Petronius comically renders this seemingly all-encompassing Greek superiority by having one of the guests remark that Trimalchio had bees brought from Athens to give him Attic honey and that the Roman born bees will be improved by the 'Greeklings'.<sup>386</sup> The sense that Greece was somehow triumphant and corrupting was particularly relevant to luxury goods as not only was Greek mythology important to the imagery, many of the luxury foodstuffs, wine and clothing were also imported from Greece, like the bees creating Trimalchio's honey. However, Rome was the superior power and, as Whitmarsh explains, discourse around Hellenism does not doubt whether the Romans should be dominant but whether they should embrace the booty or avoid contamination.<sup>387</sup> Although Priapus was originally an eastern deity, his imagery is so at odds with the Roman depiction of soft, languid luxury in Hellenistic-inspired poses we should assume that his phallic nature represents the aggression of the masculine Roman empire.<sup>388</sup>

When looking at the use of Hellenistic styles in Roman luxury goods we should be clear that we are not trying to find 'copies' but we are interested in the ways that the patrons and craftsmen clearly thought Hellenistic styles appropriate for a luxury item and in choosing these styles suggest that they also understood Greek education and heritage. We can see this for example in the Vicarello Goblet which is a Roman object made for a Roman social setting and with a distinctly Roman context yet the figures in their drapery and soft modelling, and even the Bacchic connotations show an awareness of Hellenistic imagery. The proliferation of Hellenistic influenced images in the domestic sphere suggests that we should assume that most people did not view Hellenism as negatively as the writers of many Roman texts would lead us to believe. The motifs appear to have been as, if not more, significant than a narrative scene; a small cup in Paris, for example, shows many of the motifs from the Princeton Cup and the Vicarello Goblet such as masks, goats and Priapus but they are randomly arranged and many are floating (Figure 63).

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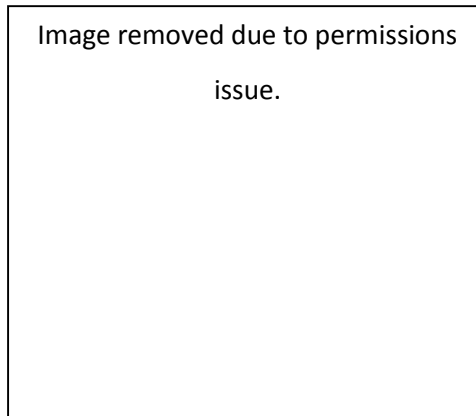
<sup>385</sup> Whitmarsh 2010: 729.

<sup>386</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 38.

<sup>387</sup> Whitmarsh 2010: 739.

<sup>388</sup> The masculinity of Rome could be articulated in a wide variety of ways as some interesting recent work has shown; Welch 2005 for example suggests that the 'historical' story of Tarpeia is used to distinguish the masculine areas of the Roman city and the state in opposition to the liminal, feminine space of the grove and Kellum 1996 shows that the phallus was influential in architectural design.





**Figure 64:** Fresco with Priapus and Galatea from Herculaneum.  
Naples, National Archaeological Museum.  
Photo: <https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/acis.html> [accessed 28/04/18].

*Paideia*, a Greek education, was highly influential in the use of Hellenistic imagery on Roman luxury ware. As well as knowledge of Greek literature, men of taste were expected to adopt urban sophisticated lifestyles that encompassed Greek values.<sup>389</sup> As the traditional preserve of the social elites, luxury ware provided them with an opportunity to demonstrate their education (and therefore wealth) to their peers in a private setting. As shown by Ruth Leader-Newby, this became increasingly important under the emperors and as the empire expanded as the elites sought new ways to define their status.<sup>390</sup> We have seen throughout the previous chapters, the ambiguous figure of Priapus was often included in images that sought to understand and define the place of Roman males in a changing and competitive social hierarchy.

It has been well documented that mythological paintings within the home were a way for wealthy Romans to display their education and their values to guests.<sup>391</sup> Evidence from Pompeii and Herculaneum suggests that mythological paintings were such an important form of display for Romans that most homes aspired to some luxury by decorating rooms with a wide variety of images, in the most elaborate examples we see large mythological panels but individual figures and motifs could also be used.<sup>392</sup> Although there is some debate about how accurately we can assign functions to the rooms of Roman houses, these paintings often seem to have been associated with rooms that could have been used for dining, such as rooms set with couches, and in this context they were most likely used to display the owner's taste and education to guests as well as providing opportunities for

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<sup>389</sup> Anderson 1993: 8.

<sup>390</sup> Leader-Newby 2004: 124.

<sup>391</sup> For example, Newby 2016; Winsor Leach 2004.

<sup>392</sup> See Wallace-Hadrill 1990 for a discussion of the spread of painting across different size of houses.

guests to discuss the images and show their own erudition.<sup>393</sup> This was an important part of the social experience of dining together. It made luxury about more than simple indulgence but also gave it a social significance as a way to form cohesive groups with similar people, and of course exclude those less educated. It also positioned the patron in the social hierarchy in a visual way.

Beyond this, it contributed to the dining experience and luxury feel by setting the *convivium* in a fantasy world inspired by sophisticated renderings of Greek mythology. In Chapter Four we will explore the fantasy landscape more fully but for now it is important to understand how references to another mythological world contributed to luxury immersion and the opportunity to demonstrate cultural status. In a damaged fresco from Herculaneum and now in the archaeological museum in Naples we see a herm of Priapus on a pedestal with a particularly largely proportioned phallus as part of a depiction of the myth of Galatea (Figure 64). She sits with her back to the viewer with her yellow mantle so loosely draped it is possible to see her nude body down to her thighs. She is clearly on display for the viewer; as we will see this eroticism is very much associated with male power and Priapus. A male in the background reaches towards her, presumably either her lover Acis or the jealous rival Polyphemus. He reclines on the ground also partially draped. The setting is clearly pastoral. Galatea sits on a rock surrounded by trees and Priapus appears to be in a rustic shrine, there are also other statues which may represent other rustic deities. Priapus in this scene not only helps to locate this in a mythical rural location but he also seems to display the lust and longing of the male who reaches towards Galatea and possibly also that of the viewer who is very much invited to be a voyeur by the position and pose of her body. To understand this painting a viewer would need knowledge of the myth, probably with reference to Ovid's telling of the story in the *Metamorphoses*, and contemporary fashions in pastoral scenes.<sup>394</sup> There is a clear Hellenistic influence in subject matter but the depiction, particularly the inclusion of Priapus and the vulnerability of Galatea, shows Roman tastes. This image would have shown to guests the sophistication and wealth of the owner as well as providing stimulation for guests of a similar social standing who would also understand the cultural allusions of the image.

At the *convivium* similar stories were also related through the tableware and the entertainment. One could also show *paideia* through reciting Greek poetry or recognising the Hellenistic influences

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<sup>393</sup> As D'Ambra 1998 emphasises, the function of a room is not always clear and it is possible they were used flexibly; see Ling 1995: 239-140 for a discussion and basic criteria for distinguishing dining spaces.

<sup>394</sup> Ov. *Met.* 13.750-903.

on contemporary Roman poets who filled their texts with allusions to Greek mythology and poets.<sup>395</sup> We have already seen the mistakes made by Trimalchio in his attempts to discuss mythology with his guests. Trimalchio provides an interesting insight into one of the problems of this kind of Hellenistic inspired luxury ware as the *Satyricon* clearly implies that aspiring members of society emulated the styles and motifs. The trade in standard, repeated images meant an education was not necessarily required to own such objects. Those who were newly wealthy could buy luxury ware to position themselves alongside the well-educated and political elites and those lower down could adapt the styles to more modest items and materials. Therefore, luxury was always a site of competition, social mobility and re-definition. As Wallace-Hadrill emphasises, once adopted by the aristocracy of Rome the foreign origins of luxury items cease to be highly significant as they become Roman symbols to all other strata of society emulating the elites and, therefore, such goods could be important in creating a sense of 'belonging'.<sup>396</sup>

A south Italian ceramic cup in Princeton shows how the motifs from silverware could be adapted for cheaper materials (Figure 65). This two-handled cup has a medallion in the centre showing Priapus on a pillar overlooking a seated Venus and Pan wrestling Eros. The scene is reminiscent of motifs found in silverware showing Venus seated on rocks with drapery around her waist with a herm of Priapus nearby. Although significantly less expensive than a silver cup this piece is still well crafted and clearly designed for formal dining, suggesting that the concept of appropriate imagery for luxury wares was widespread and used in different media. The cup in Paris we referred to earlier shows that Hellenising motifs could be adopted without the expense of a detailed scene (Figure 63). On this cup the disparate motifs, show an awareness of typical imagery from expensive silver cups but they are not set into any landscape. These examples also suggest that for the educated elite occasions such as dinner parties where one could 'prove' their education were important for social distinctions. As a rustic Italic god, Priapus helps to bring the high-end luxury ware into the realities of Roman life.

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<sup>395</sup> Hunter 2006 specifically examines Hellenistic influences on Roman poetry but many others have looked at allusion in individual works or genres; Hubbard 1998 looks, in particular, at literary allusion in the pastoral genre.

<sup>396</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 1990: 192.



**Figure 65:** Ceramic cup with Venus, Priapus and Eros. 2<sup>nd</sup> century BCE. Princeton, University Art Museum.

Photo: [www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/18587](http://www.artmuseum.princeton.edu/collections/objects/18587) [accessed 28/04/18].

Although all levels of society could own some form of luxury imagery by employing Greek mythology on objects, not everyone could afford the luxury of time, specifically the time to indulge in leisure activities and to have an education. This really was the preserve of the wealthy, those living the ‘simple life’ advocated by Roman moralists would not have had the time for education, philosophy or appreciating the arts as they would have been tied almost constantly to working the land. Thus, the leisure time available to the elites of Roman society was an important element in the discourse of luxury. It influences the real-life contexts for luxury items, such as dining, and the fantasy scenes depicted on luxury goods.

It will be clear from the examples that we have considered so far, that luxury was closely tied to Hellenism and specifically relied on mythology depicted in Hellenistic styles to provide a language for the Romans to define themselves, their status and their priorities. However, implications for status and hierarchies are not the full story and, following Newby, I would suggest that the meanings of mythological imagery could be multiple and operate simultaneously.<sup>397</sup> Therefore, it is possible that these mythological landscapes were not only important displays of *paideia* but also offered a form of escapism into a world of *otium* and care-free self-indulgence.<sup>398</sup> Priapus shows that this luxury world is a Hellenistic fantasy reoriented around and on Italian soil.

Hellenistic styles are associated with movement, swirling drapery and unruliness which made them more appropriate for the worlds of Bacchus and Venus in which a loss of control is encouraged through intoxication and eroticism. This suggests that the use of Greek styles is not always a

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<sup>397</sup> Newby 2016: 24.

<sup>398</sup> Newby 2016: 30.



**Figure 66:** Detail of the satyr on the 'Vicarello Goblet'. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE-1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Cleveland, The Cleveland Museum of Art.

Photo: [www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371](http://www.clevelandart.org/art/1966.371) [accessed 28/04/18].

conscious attempt to depict something 'Greek' but rather an attempt to use a style appropriate to depict something 'other' or just outside the realm of real lived experience. If we return to the Vicarello Goblet we can see some of this more clearly. One side of the goblet has a maenad and a satyr both dancing in ecstasy. The satyr throws his head back with an emotional facial expression, his hair flows back in waves and his tail is full of life and rendered in detailed curves and waves (Figure 66). He is nude aside from a panther skin which falls from his arm in tumultuous and flowing undulations. This is a figure lost in the moment and the way his features are rendered accentuates this. The presence of this on a wine vessel seems to invite the drinker to join him in that distant and timeless state and the influence of wine is suggested in the decoration by the assemblage of silver cups and kraters on the table and the pouring action of Priapus, which may well be an offering of wine to his phallus.

We noted when looking at the Vicarello Goblet that the image of Priapus on that piece was unusually rendered as active, even alive. This seems to be largely limited to his presence on luxury items for a dining context. In the case of the Vicarello Goblet he is pouring a libation onto his phallus, a motif we noted in Chapter One when looking at a bronze statuette as potentially symbolic of the religious importance of his fertility. Perhaps more significantly, he seems to be interacting with the maenad sitting beside him. We have previously suggested that in most images a herm of Priapus suggested an image in a semi-mythological historical setting, further to that, it seems that in some luxury items we should consider the setting to be so removed from any earthly past that it is complete mythology and Priapus is able (partly) to break the bounds of his manufacture, which are heavily emphasised elsewhere, and come to life. Hellenism is often the primary style in objects with

Priapus depicted this way which may provide another visual clue as to the distance of this world. It is very much the world of the gods, rather than that of humble peasants, and Priapus is an active god within it. An active Priapus shows that this world is part of a 'performance' much like the performances of status and wealth at play in the *convivium*; the dinner scene in the *Satyricon* reflects this and is a parody on the way dining and mythology operate as performance.

Hellenism was, therefore, an important way of displaying sophistication and of setting the scene for escapism at dinner parties. However, it was always a contentious and complex issue in Roman discourse. Priapus is an important way of displaying and thinking about this as although he was originally eastern in origin, as we have seen in previous chapters, his crude and masculine appearance was a convenient way to display the core values of Roman piety and masculinity. Therefore, when we find him in Hellenistic imagery he can appear to be a stark contrast to the other figures and he disrupts the Hellenistic ideal. He also appropriates this Hellenistic world for Roman culture; he brings the luxury and abandon of the world of the gods to the Roman people.

## Eroticism

Hellenistic styles and luxury materials easily lend themselves to notions of romance and softness popular in both Greek and Roman literature. This is where the worlds of Bacchus and Venus meet; the emphasis of this realm is on bodies and desire. Images which situate Priapus within an opulent world carry with them connotations of eroticism, sensuality and hedonism; they feature characters in languid recline, romantic embrace and inviting poses but the hard, phallic nature of Priapus reminds us of the power and privilege of those able to indulge in physical pleasure and act as a voyeur.

One of the images that most clearly demonstrates that this idyllic world of soft embrace is a first century CE gem in Vienna that shows an enthroned Ariadne with a languid Bacchus partially nude beside her and leaning against her in a feminine way. Priapus is strangely placed prominently above Bacchus' head and seems to be floating over the couple (Figure 67).<sup>399</sup> This image has many of the motifs typical of the discourse around Roman luxury; Bacchus is presented as young and effeminate like the eastern slave boys used by the wealthy, the drapery is heavy and luxurious, as is the

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<sup>399</sup> Barbara McManus on <http://www.vroma.org/> identifies this couple as Venus and Adonis, although they are shown in similar compositions the *thyrsus* and Priapus in this case suggest that Bacchus and Ariadne are more suitable characters. However, it is significant that both couples are associated with this luxury realm and are depicted in similar ways.

furniture they use and Priapus' presence reminds us of the exoticism, eroticism and mythological contexts. Poets often imagine themselves in a similar embrace with their lover and it captures many of the desires of the elegists in a visual form.<sup>400</sup> There is also a distinctly 'Greek' feel to the pose and Skinner traces this back as far as Attic Greek vases depicting Aphrodite with Adonis.<sup>401</sup> Lucretius, a first century BCE poet, even imagines Venus holding Mars in such a way:

For you alone can delight mortals with quiet peace, since Mars  
mighty in battle rules the savage works of war, who often casts  
himself upon your lap wholly vanquished by the ever-living wound  
of love, and thus looking upward, with shapely neck thrown back,  
feeds his eager eyes with love, gaping upon you, goddess, and, as  
he lies back, his breath hangs upon your lips. There as he reclines,  
goddess, upon your sacred body, do you, bending around him from  
above, pour from your lips sweet coaxings, and for your Romans,  
illustrious one, crave quiet peace.<sup>402</sup>

This scene from the poem not only mirrors the pose of Ariadne and Bacchus on the gem but also uses the language associated with love and luxury, Mars is overwhelmed by love, kisses are 'soft' and there is a strong sense of longing. Images of Venus and Mars also reflect the image of Bacchus and Ariadne and the scene portrayed in this poem (Figure 68). In this passage the concept of 'softness', often utilised by Augustan poets, is employed to powerful effect, suggesting that the influence of Venus is so strong that even the uber-masculine Mars is reduced to tenderness and longing.<sup>403</sup> Reclining is a recurrent motif in both luxury images and love poems from the Hellenistic pastoral poets to the Roman elegists, for example in Theocritus' *Idyll* 15 Adonis looks 'beautiful lying on his silver couch, with the down of manhood just showing on his cheeks' and brings to mind dining where guests reclined to indulge their appetites and enjoy entertainment. Not only does reclining typify the romance and leisure of the world of luxury, it was an important aspect of Roman dining too and a mark of adulthood.<sup>404</sup> Priapus is never part of this as he is the antithesis of a soft world in which people languidly lie around; he is always upright and rigid disrupting the softness of the

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<sup>400</sup> See for example *Anth. Pal.* 5.25 and *Tib.* 1.5 for examples of poets longing for embrace.

<sup>401</sup> Skinner 2005: 236.

<sup>402</sup> *Lucr.* 1.29 -42. Trans. Rouse 1924.

<sup>403</sup> Emel Janow 1969: 71 suggests that in literature Venus hold the power of the lover and her partners play the submissive role in their relationship, this seems to be reflected in these images.

<sup>404</sup> Booth 1991: 109.



**Figure 67:** Sardonyx cameo of Bacchus, Ariadne and Priapus. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Vienna, Kunsthistorisches Museum.

Photo:  
[www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus\\_images/venus\\_adonis.jpg](http://www.vroma.org/images/mcmanus_images/venus_adonis.jpg) [accessed 28/04/18].



**Figure 68:** Fresco of Mars and Venus from the House of Mars and Venus, Pompeii (VI.9.47). Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo:  
[https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/marte\\_e\\_venere%2c\\_da\\_casa\\_di\\_marte\\_e\\_venere\\_o\\_delle\\_nozze\\_d%27ercole\\_a\\_pompei%2c\\_9248%2c\\_01.jpg](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/8/8e/marte_e_venere%2c_da_casa_di_marte_e_venere_o_delle_nozze_d%27ercole_a_pompei%2c_9248%2c_01.jpg) [accessed 28/04/18].

image. Therefore, he is a reminder of the lust and power relations that lie behind such soft poses. There is certainly an element of eroticism present in reclining postures; like sleep they leave one vulnerable to voyeurism from phallic male viewers like Priapus.

A very common figure in erotic luxury images is Ariadne who, when not shown enthroned with Bacchus, is specifically depicted in a sleeping pose that invites voyeurism.<sup>405</sup> The marble sarcophagus of Maconiana Severiana in the Getty Museum typifies the elements of many of these images (Figure 80). Ariadne lies only partially covered and posed so as to emphasise her feminine curves whilst Bacchic figures revel around her drinking and dancing. A herm of Priapus in an *anasyrma* pose stands at the right-hand side on top of a column and a drunken Bacchus stands at the centre of the composition. We will look more closely at the funerary context of this image later in this chapter but this pose clearly replicates many found in frescoes at Pompeii within a domestic context.<sup>406</sup> It is also common for hermaphrodites to be portrayed in sleeping poses, as we have seen in the House of the Dioscuri in Chapter Two, where they are vulnerable to being watched and being attacked (Figure 44). In these, and many other, images Priapus is in fact a voyeur. We know that although he seems threatening, his herm form constrains him from acting. However, this does not prevent his looking. In this respect we could begin to view Priapus as emblematic of the viewer who also looks at these

<sup>405</sup> For Ariadne and voyeurism in Roman art see Elsner 2007a and Frederick 1995; for voyeurism more generally as a form of power in the domestic sphere see Clarke 1995 and Severy-Hoven 2012.

<sup>406</sup> Frederick 1995 demonstrates that a sleeping Ariadne was one of the most, if not the most, popular decorative scene in Pompeii.



images and is potentially inspired to lust after the figures. Like Priapus, the viewer is in a position of power as he can look on unhindered, often with figures arranged specifically for his pleasure, but he is unable to interact with the figures or act in any way. Verity Platt has described the viewer as being drawn in to the scene but with enough distance to still feel superiority over the thing beheld; the location of Priapus on a column overlooking the scene may reflect this position of the viewer.<sup>407</sup>

The voyeurism of such scenes is enhanced by the fact the body is being revealed for the gaze of those in the scene and the viewer, in this case Pan lifts Ariadne's drapery to expose her. However, the images of hermaphrodites turn that into a witty joke at the expense of the attacker, and viewer. Like many of these luxury images, elegy is also highly voyeuristic, often reducing the loved one to a series of seductive body parts. In Propertius 1.3 for example, the mistress, Cynthia, is asleep and described as being like Ariadne. The poet proceeds to garland her, play with her hair and her hands whilst watching her sleep 'gazing intently, like Argus on Io's new-horned brow.'<sup>408</sup> Priapus' extravagant phallicism is also a reminder of the potential violence that always accompanies the voyeuristic gaze. In mythology he always attempts to rape the women he finds sleeping and those familiar with the mythological canon would be aware that the power in these situations always rests with the male.<sup>409</sup>

Venus, on the other hand, projects power as well as femininity in her image. A silver gilt medallion in the Altes Museum, Berlin, typifies her languid romantic nature in many of these images (Figure 69). She sits leaning against a rock with her whole body frontally exposed to the viewer in a seductive manner. She is finely clothed and the layers of the drapery and her sandals below are rendered in detail but her garment falls away from one shoulder exposing her breast. She is accompanied by a goose, Priapus and Eros in an outdoor setting; a shrine is suggested by the pillar in the centre of the scene. Priapus is depicted as a herm but in common with many of his images on silver appears conscious and in this case is looking directly at Venus. Aside from the typical formal nature of Priapus, everything in this image is shown as being soft and sensuous.

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<sup>407</sup> Platt 2002: 87.

<sup>408</sup> Prop. 1.3.

<sup>409</sup> See Frazel 2003 for a discussion of Priapus' attempted rapes in literature and more broadly Curran 1984 discusses the prevalence of rape in literature with a focus on Ovid, who authors Priapus' attempts, and shows there were consequences for the woman whether the rape was successful or not.



**Figure 69:** Silver medallion with Venus and Priapus. 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE- 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Berlin, Altes Museum.

Photo: [http://smb-digital.de/emuseumplus?service=direct/1/resultlightboxview/result.t2.collection\\_ligthbox.\\$tsptitlelink.link&sp=10&sp=sollection&sp=fieldvalue&sp=0&s](http://smb-digital.de/emuseumplus?service=direct/1/resultlightboxview/result.t2.collection_ligthbox.$tsptitlelink.link&sp=10&sp=sollection&sp=fieldvalue&sp=0&s) [accessed 18/04/18].



**Figure 70:** Venus in a Bikini from House I.11.6 at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeological Museum.

Photo: Berthold Werner, CC BY-SA 3.0, <https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=32224329>

The complexities of Venus are often emphasised when her image is complemented by that of Priapus. Often, they are shown together as a Priapus herm with Venus leaning on him. A famous example comes from Pompeii and even gave the name to the house in which it was found; the 'Venus in a bikini' (Figure 70). This small marble statue shows Venus adjusting her sandal whilst leaning on a Priapus that sits on top of a column and Eros lies on the floor. This statue is particularly famous for the gold paint which has been preserved decorating Venus' body, Priapus' cap and his genitals.

The pose of Venus in this statue is a further example of the way in which the female body could be contorted for the male gaze, and the Priapus is a reminder of the male gaze, whilst the combination of these figures is innately dangerous to look at.<sup>410</sup> Venus and Priapus sit on the boundary between order and chaos, and they can bring fecundity and luck as well as being destructive. Priapus' phallus particularly indicates the means through which Venus operates, virility is generally very positive but, as Roman poets frequently remind us, lust can also bring misery if unfulfilled or too excessive and it can be dangerous in many cases.

Images such as these show a Hellenised and sensual image of Venus. The overall appearance is romantic and subdued and Venus does not show any power in her person, in fact she appears posed to be gazed at, an effect amplified by the lack of direct gaze from her, the downward gaze being often a sign of submission. Yet, this faux submission is a manifestation of the power of Venus and the figures around her suggest her significance in matters of love and lust. Priapus is a strong reminder of sex, lust and even violence, and Eros brings to mind the sudden way in which Venus can act; striking wherever and whenever she wants through her son. The outdoor setting, often used in luxury images, is reminiscent of pastoral poetry and the romance of the past, as we will see in Chapter Four. This is, therefore, a complex and somewhat ambiguous image, it undoubtedly invites the viewer to look and to muse on his desires but it could also be read as a warning that desire cannot always be controlled. A sarcophagus in the Louvre serves as a reminder of the danger of confronting the gods (Figure 71). It shows Acteon discovering Diana at her bath, posed to look like a popular crouching Venus motif, and then being attacked by his hounds. Priapus accompanies the vignette in which Acteon is killed but he faces the direction of Diana and is most likely, therefore,

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<sup>410</sup> Hales 2002: 257 shows that Venus draws her strength from the ambiguity over whether or not it is safe to look at her.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 71:** Marble sarcophagus showing Priapus in Acteon myth. Paris, Louvre.

Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 296.

directing the viewer to act as a voyeur; this is a complex scene that simultaneously encourages looking whilst warning against it.

Images such as these associate sex with luxury and, like the other images featuring Priapus and women, have a strong sense of voyeurism. Such images suggest that luxury for the Roman male was heavily influenced by his own power over others; power that came from his position as a Roman in an expanding empire, from his position as a wealthy member of a political class and from his inviolable masculinity. As Platt puts it, 'to view voyeuristically is to feel that one has control over what is seen.'<sup>411</sup> Priapus shows us that this power allowed him both to look and act towards those who were subordinates because of status, gender or ethnicity.<sup>412</sup> As we noted earlier, the Hellenistic style of such pieces, although endowed with ambiguity with regards to its cultural dominance in Rome, is ultimately a reminder that Greece has been conquered and her culture appropriated by her conquerors. Sexual objects and the east are tied together in notions of femininity; both are characterised as feminine and soft and therefore provide the 'hard' Roman male, Priapus, with the dominant, controlling position.<sup>413</sup>

Objectification and voyeuristic gazes were not only directed at women, adolescent boys were also depicted in eroticising poems and images, where they often seem to have been considered more of a luxury than women. The only legitimate way to have sex with a boy under Roman law was to pay for a slave or prostitute, and pederasty was seen as an integral part of classical Greek culture, so a

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<sup>411</sup> Platt 2002: 87.

<sup>412</sup> Severy Hoven 2012: 572 emphasises that eroticism in art is an expression of the patriarchal order in which adult men had the freedom to subordinate women and slaves.

<sup>413</sup> Williams 1999: 137.

sexual relationship with a boy was a way for a hellenophile to show sophistication and power.<sup>414</sup> The age at which a boy was desirable was fleeting, usually between 14 and 18, which only added to the desirability and the fact that considerable wealth would be required to replace boys as they got older contributed to the importance of these slaves as a status symbol. Images in which Priapus can be seen with Eros as an adolescent boy are emblematic of this relationship, although usually represented as a scene of sacrifice, the contrast between the young effeminate body of Eros and the masculine, phallic Priapus is striking and reminiscent of the contrast between Greece and Rome in Roman thought. Priapus represents the hard, phallic Roman male and Eros the soft, effeminate Greek. This lends itself well to a narrative of dominance, as clearly boys are to be looked at and penetrated, however, as we have seen, the relationship between Rome and Greek culture was complex, as were relationships with boys in Roman literature. It is notable that Tibullus appeals to Priapus when trying to seduce a boy in poem 1.4:

Priapus, so a shady cover may be yours  
And neither sun nor snowfall harm your head,  
How does your guile enthrall the gorgeous boys?<sup>415</sup>

Priapus replies with advice about offering anything the boy wants saying 'love wins most by subservience.' As we have seen this is typical language to use about love to a mistress in elegy, this poem suggests seducing a boy is no different, they will 'grasp for gifts' and 'bit by bit accept a yoke.'<sup>416</sup> Despite expecting the poetic persona eventually to triumph, the language is typical of elegy and suggests that the lover will have to accept some 'subservience' to the boy. Perhaps it is very telling that in many images Priapus is paired with Eros who may look like a boy and represent desires but actually holds a deep and destructive power of his own. However, the power is always primarily in the control of the seducer who can buy luxury gifts in order to 'buy' and control the body of another, as suggested by the use of language such as 'yoke'.

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<sup>414</sup> Williams 1999: 67-102 discusses Roman views of Greek pederasty at length. It is worth noting that relationships with males of any age do not seem to have been the result of Greek influence but that sex with an exotic young boy in particular carried connotations of Greekness. Also see Ingleheart 2015.

<sup>415</sup> Tib. 1.4.1-3. Trans. Juster 2012.

<sup>416</sup> Tib. 1.4.58; 1.4.16. Trans. Juster 2012.



**Figure 72:** Gem with Bacchus and Priapus. Paris, National Library of France.

Photo: [http://medailles.antiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/reco rd/7320?vc=epkh4lf71zvnrsiwdisvenebao\\_t2sdhyq 69-y\\_efyqqeiswozael5p-pp3e7q800j55zcncv1-rh\\_v4f19-gnlt0da6uvvnazkohe1bos](http://medailles.antiques.bnf.fr/ws/catalogue/app/collection/reco rd/7320?vc=epkh4lf71zvnrsiwdisvenebao_t2sdhyq 69-y_efyqqeiswozael5p-pp3e7q800j55zcncv1-rh_v4f19-gnlt0da6uvvnazkohe1bos) [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 73:** Amethyst imitation gem with Priapus and Eros. 1<sup>st</sup> -3<sup>rd</sup> century CE. London, British Museum.

Photo: [http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collecti on\\_online/collection\\_object\\_details.aspx?objectid =435505&partid=1&searchtext=priapus&page=2](http://www.britishmuseum.org/research/collecti on_online/collection_object_details.aspx?objectid =435505&partid=1&searchtext=priapus&page=2) [accessed 15/04/18].

Images of attractive boys are usually posed, like women, to invite the gaze and to give permission to look. Even Bacchus, in contrast to the older bearded figure we encountered in Chapter One, is young and attractive in this Hellenising world. For example, a gem of Bacchus in conversation with Priapus shows many of the characteristics of figures that Bartman calls 'sexy boys.'<sup>417</sup> His figure is slim and long, it is youthful but with enough stature to suggest full masculinity is not far away and, although wearing a cloak, the drapery draws the eye to his genitalia rather than covers it (Figure 72). Priapus also shows his genitals but the erect phallus is a stark contrast to the adolescence of the youth. Bacchus has a typically effeminate style, for example, long hair and loose clothing. These elements invite the viewer to look upon the figure as a sexual object and the use of the exotic appearance to distance this youth from Roman manliness gives further permission to sexualise and look. The presence of Priapus both sets the scene as being beyond reality and also serves as a reminder of the lust invited by the image. A gem showing an adolescent Eros with Priapus in the British Museum goes a step further in creating a sexual display by twisting the figure of Eros to look behind while stepping forward emphasising both the genitals and the softness of the body (Figure 73). Again, it is important to note that the eroticism of these figures is highly ambiguous; although they seem to invite voyeurism, the fact they depict gods means they can never be trusted. It is of course, possible that this was part of the appeal and the fact that they depict deities is supposed to add to the

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<sup>417</sup> Bartman 2002.

excitement at seeing something forbidden. They could also suggest the ultimate in a display of confidence by the Romans by showing that they were powerful enough to bring the gods within their homes and to tame them to some extent.<sup>418</sup> This is similar to a phenomenon we will see in Chapter Four of bringing the landscape into the home in order to assert power over nature. Certainly, the *Priapea* suggest that Priapus is a god that can be owned in a material sense.

This brings us back to the fact that for all the other-worldliness in the decoration of luxury imagery, it is associated with tangible objects, people and places within the domestic sphere. The combination of eroticism, voyeurism and exoticism particularly associates the decoration with dining where they were an important part of the immersive experience. The images are not just fantasy idylls but could be reflective of reality; foreign boys bearing a resemblance to such images would be used as slaves in dining rooms so that the wealthy guests could look at and objectify them in a similar manner. Trimalchio, for example, dresses one of his slaves up as Bacchus, perhaps like the examples we have seen, and has him serve the guests in the dinner scene of the *Satyricon*.<sup>419</sup> We also see such slaves in domestic painting, for example the dining scene from the House of the Chaste Lovers we explored earlier has a young, dark skinned slave boy serving the reclining couple (Figure 62). Throughout the literature about dining, long-haired, foreign young boys are referred to time and time again as a feature of luxurious meals.<sup>420</sup> Often they arouse jealousy and desire in the guests. This reminds us that Romans could see the rewards of empire in both their images and in a tangible sense in daily life.

The erotic male and female share many of the same features in Roman art and poetry; on the most basic level beautiful bodies have similar proportions, line and modelling in representations but the most attractive are praised for their smoothness, firmness and youth.<sup>421</sup> Their softness is in sharp contrast to Priapus' hardness and to some extent defines typical masculine traits by desiring the

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<sup>418</sup> Hales 2002: 259 suggests that bringing Aphrodite indoors in the Hellenistic era is a way of controlling who looks at her and limits her ability to act through inciting desire.

<sup>419</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 41.

<sup>420</sup> Richlin 2009 looks at the links between the *Satyricon* and young slave boys; D'Arms 1991 lists different types of slaves and highlights the young wine waiters were the most prestigious and usually had Greek names (often from Greek mythology). Dunbabin 2003: 444 suggests that attractive attendants were no less important in impressing guests than good wine and silver plates.

<sup>421</sup> Stansbury-O'Donnell 2014: 41; Dalby 2000: 263.

opposite in a sexual partner.<sup>422</sup> They are represented in very similar languid and enticing poses but the literature suggests that a certain element of coyness or rejection was also a turn-on. Elegy brings together many of these themes around luxury, sensuality and power, particularly highlighting the ambiguity of each element in Roman culture. The settings of the poems are generally imbued with hallmarks of Hellenism. Often the persona in the poem is required to provide exotic gifts in order to seduce their lover, as Priapus advises Tibullus' poet persona in poem 1.4, which contributes to a sense of luxury and exoticism but there is also much ambiguity as the poetic personae also reject urbanism and sophistication in favour of a simple life. This reflects the ambiguity of the poems in general; they embrace the tools provided by Hellenism and the Roman Empire more generally and use them to reject values of labour and conquest.

On the other hand, elegy plays with gender roles and often casts the poet persona as feminine, in the case of Propertius 1.3, for example, the poet is too worried to wake Cynthia in case it causes an argument and at the end of the poem he is scolded by her for coming back late and having other mistresses. Like the images of Venus with Priapus, the ambiguity in elegy suggests there is power in the ability to seduce that comes from being the victim of voyeurism. In fact, the discourse of Roman luxury is permeated with the language of 'slavery', this runs through invective, elegy and satire, and is suggested in the sense of abandonment to the body and senses in the visual imagery. As Ellen Greene states 'The conventional stance of the elegiac lover is one of enslavement to his emotions and of servitude to his mistress.'<sup>423</sup> Of course, despite the rhetoric, these men did not experience actual servitude to their lovers. Ovid's *Amores* makes clear that although he uses the language typical of elegy that suggests he is devoted to his mistress, he holds most of the power in their relationship (until she finds another man) and this is often displayed in threats and violence.<sup>424</sup> The recurrent motif of servitude to a mistress was also used by moralists to condemn hellenophiles as slaves to luxury and a foreign culture. Charges of excess were also bound with notions of loss of control and even loss of masculinity.

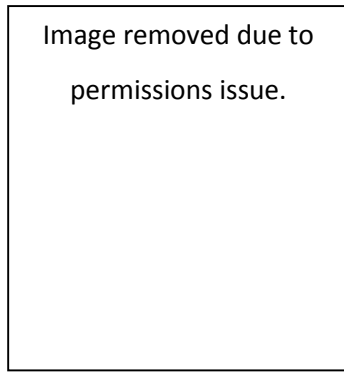
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<sup>422</sup> There is evidence that some men may have preferred adult male sexual partners, however, most luxury images represent body types associated with power and indulgence; namely young women and boys. Williams 1999 and Clarke 2005 both discuss adult relationships.

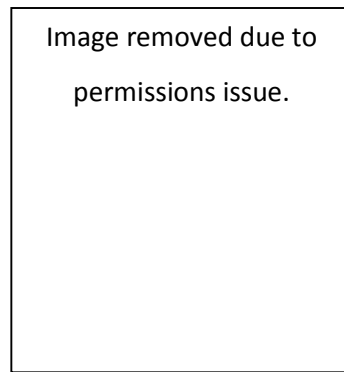
<sup>423</sup> Greene 1998: xiii.

<sup>424</sup> Ov. *Am.* (particularly 1.5 and 1.7). Also see Greene 1998: 67-92 for in depth discussion of violence towards mistresses in the *Amores*.





**Figure 74:** Fragment of a marble relief showing Priapus with a mirror. Rome, Vatican Museums.  
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1037.



**Figure 75:** Fresco depicting Priapus and erotes from House VII.4.59 at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: LIMC 2009: 1037.

## Effeminacy

We explored Roman concepts of effeminacy in the last chapter as definitions of un-manliness and therefore laughable. In this chapter we return to similar concepts but not from the perspective of critique. Instead we will look at how Priapus' image also plays a part in the culture that surrounded luxury in which some men adopted eastern styles in order to display a sophisticated urban identity. This 'effeminacy' was a manifestation of the tendency to define masculine status through private wealth and Greek culture. Virgil in the *Aeneid* gives a useful Roman characterisation of the eastern effeminate male when he has Numanus shout to the Trojans:

You wear embroidered saffron and gleaming purple,  
idleness pleases you, you delight in the enjoyment of dance,  
and your tunics have sleeves, and your hats have ribbons.  
O truly you Phrygian women, as you're not Phrygian men.<sup>425</sup>

This clearly reflects many of the contemporary markers of effeminacy in Virgil's society and many of these characteristics feature in moralising literature. Some of them also appear in depictions of Priapus, for example Priapus in the doorway of the House of the Vettii (Figure 27) wears a long, colourful tunic and a Phrygian cap, along with his slightly languid pose this associates him with 'soft', eastern luxuries. In contrast to heavily decorated tunics and hats, the appropriate public apparel for

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<sup>425</sup> Vir. *Aen.* 9.614-617. Trans. Fagles 2010.

a Roman man was the toga.<sup>426</sup> Oehmke has argued that Priapus was in fact an effeminate character who, much like Hermaphrodite, mixed male and female bodies and characteristics. This stretches the evidence in the images too far but the notion that Priapus' image sometimes plays upon eastern characteristics associated with effeminacy is apparent.<sup>427</sup> However, the House of the Vettii Priapus wears his tunic and hat in such an ungainly way it is difficult to imagine him as one of the effeminate men indulging in the luxuries of Roman urban culture.

One visual symbol of effeminacy, particularly associated with Venus, is the mirror. Priapus is sometimes depicted in the decoration of mirrors or alongside Venus holding a mirror, but an unusual image on a fragment of marble relief in the Vatican seems to show Priapus looking into a mirror (Figure 74).<sup>428</sup> This is a fragmentary piece so some assumption is required but it would seem further to associate Priapus with hedonism and provide another contrast between this masculine figure and the softness of luxury. A fresco from Pompeii, which shows Priapus watching erotes play with cosmetics, suggests a similar immersion of Priapus into a 'feminine' and 'vain' world (Figure 75). Priapus appears to be at odds with everything in this scene from the young soft bodies of the erotes to the luxury jewellery and crowns that surround his basic herm. In moralist writings the mirror is very much associated with destructive luxury behaviour and vanity in young men. This is reflective of the common condemnations of behaviour in men considered effeminate and indulgent, especially at the *convivium*. For example, Seneca the Elder wrote of young men 'braiding their hair' and 'beautifying themselves with disgusting finery' which he associates with typical drunken activities such as singing and dancing.<sup>429</sup> A painting of Priapus on a pedestal alongside Venus holding a mirror firmly associates this kind of feminine behaviour with dining as it is situated in a garden *triclinium* in House 1.13.16 at Pompeii (Figure 76). Rabun Taylor argues that as the mirror is a gendered object it features in scenes of gender ambivalence and vacillation and these images seem to associate masculine Priapus with feminine contexts.<sup>430</sup> It is, therefore, noteworthy that in this image Venus holds the mirror to face the viewer; perhaps it is intended to encourage reflection on the

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<sup>426</sup> Davies 2005 discusses the association of the toga with masculinity; Hackworth Petersen 2009 explores the importance of dress for freedmen attempting to show their place in Roman culture and suggests the toga was used to distinguish citizens from freedmen and foreigners.

<sup>427</sup> Oehmke 2007.

<sup>428</sup> Megow 2009 identifies this fragment as Priapus; even though it has no phallus, the bearded figure and the cap suggest it is a reasonable identification.

<sup>429</sup> Sen. *Controv.* 1. pr.8-9. Hair, in particular features in descriptions of luxury and seems to have erotic connotations, Griffin 1976: 92-3 highlights the emphasis on hair in Augustan poetry.

<sup>430</sup> Taylor 2008: 7-8.



**Figure 76:** Painting of Venus and Priapus from House I.13.16 at Pompeii.  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

‘effeminacy’ and luxury of the *convivium*, while the Priapus alongside her plays upon notions of masculinity.

As we have seen, the poetic personae in love poetry often show effeminate characteristics in their inability to dominate the women they love. The roles are reversed and they instead become the ‘females’ of the relationship and so subject to uncontrolled lust and a lack of interest in ‘manly’ activities such as politics and war. This, however, was not necessarily a negative thing, Catullus, in the mid-first century BCE, aggressively defends his poetry:

I’ll bugger you and stuff your gobs,  
 Aurelius Kink and Poofster Furius,  
 For thinking me, because my verses  
 Are rather sissy, not quite decent.  
 For the true poet should be chaste  
 Himself, his verses need not be.  
 Indeed they’ve salt and charm then only  
 When rather sissy and not quite decent<sup>431</sup>

This refers not only to possible obscenity but the use of the term *mollitia*, ‘softness’ (or in this case, ‘sissiness’), suggests effeminacy too. According to Persius, elegy itself was too decadent as an art

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<sup>431</sup> Catull. 16.1-8. Trans. Lee 1990.

form so it seems that the poets and their patrons also embraced a little decadence over the 'hardness' of traditional Roman sensibilities.<sup>432</sup> It would seem that as a figure indelibly associated with 'hardness' and power, Priapus is the antithesis of this culture and lifestyle, however, these men are still concerned with being masculine and virile; they are embracing a new way to represent their place in society. Catullus' poem, in particular, demonstrates that writing 'soft' verses should not undermine his virility and this is emphasised by the language he uses which mirrors that of the aggressive masculinity of the *Priapea*. Priapus could be associated with the Hellenistic romance but he could use this association in defining Roman masculinity. We have also seen in previous chapters that the image of Priapus could be used in very sophisticated ways and it is his ambiguity in this area of rusticity versus sophistication that makes him so appropriate for a wide range of discourses. Much of this longing for romance also involves a rejection of urbanity, of course this is only window dressing on a poetic world that is actually very sophisticated and luxurious, much like the way the image of Priapus is used. We have seen this in the images that add accoutrements of urban luxury to outdoor, rural scenes for example the silver objects and finely carved pillar on the Vicarello Goblet.

Maecenas is one of the most famous men criticised for his luxury lifestyle in Rome. Craig Williams has described him as a 'byword for a dissolute, luxurious and effeminate lifestyle'.<sup>433</sup> This echoes the eighteenth and nineteenth century discourses we have already seen. He was just as infamous during his own lifetime and both praised and criticised by contemporaries either as a great patron-poet or as indulgent and immoral. Seneca said of him:

Maecenas' lifestyle is so well known there is no need to tell of the way he walked, how delicate he was, how he desired to be seen, how he refused to keep his vices secret. Consequently, isn't it true that his style was just as loose as his tunic was?<sup>434</sup>

However, this 'style' was part of a lifestyle that led to him establishing some of the largest and most famous *horti* of the Roman world and becoming a patron to some of Rome's most famous poets. Rather than being erroneous, Maecenas' style was part of the image of the hellenophile. It was easy for the moralists to link a life devoted to literature and aesthetics with one devoted to pleasure due to the 'Greekness' and 'softness' of such a life. Since Roman ideals were centred on control and

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<sup>432</sup> Pers. 1.

<sup>433</sup> Williams 1999: 148.

<sup>434</sup> Sen. *Ep.* 114. 4-6. Trans. Williams 1999: 163.



**Figure 77:** Marble 'satyr play relief'.  
Rome, Capitoline Museum.  
Photo: Euan Martin.

moderation, it was important to be cultured but not 'too' cultured.<sup>435</sup> However, we should also be wary here of taking Roman rhetoric that was part of societal competition at face value and instead seek to understand the importance of portraying oneself as sophisticated in a variety of contexts and where this was appropriate.

Maecenas' *horti* were an elaborate display of sophistication and retreat from urban life. They were also associated with literature and the arts; Maecenas was patron to many contemporary authors, for example, Horace who sets his Priapus in *Satire* 1.8 in the gardens, and the *horti* included a theatre and art collection. Refinement can clearly be seen in the so called 'satyr-play reliefs' which were found in his *horti* and show a complex scene of theatrical props, satyrs and landscape all overlooked by Priapus (Figure 77). The Hellenism of the reliefs is clear but they also speak to typical Roman motifs and concerns, to which we will return in Chapter Four. In fact, they seem to typify Pollitt's comment that Roman-Hellenistic works are Greek in style with a Roman subject, intention and function.<sup>436</sup> *Horti* were also ambiguous places and this ambiguity extended to a moral ambiguity. It is, therefore, interesting that a figure seen to be on the fringes of acceptable behaviour would be so associated with investing in a semi-public/semi-private space associated with boundaries and transgression, as well as the immersive, aesthetic experience found in other forms of Roman luxury. Like the *triclinium*, the garden surrounded one with exotic scents, voyeuristic

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<sup>435</sup> Edwards 1993: 23.

<sup>436</sup> Pollitt 1986: 157.

opportunities and imported goods, in addition it provided a space that was semi-private to enjoy them. We will return to the importance of garden spaces in Chapter Four. We have also seen that within the domestic sphere, gardens and dining spaces were often closely linked, and the garden could provide an important addition to the sensation of dining. In some cases the dining room opened onto the garden and, therefore, guests enjoyed the views and sensual stimulation of both spaces simultaneously. Although he is ostensibly very masculine, as a symbol of liminal worlds Priapus is a highly appropriate figure to represent these spaces and individuals that play with boundaries. He is so masculine that he is able to absorb a certain amount of effeminacy and luxury in order to demonstrate the taste, status and wealth that allowed the cultural elite to indulge

The conflict between urban and rural is also unavoidable when discussing Roman luxury and masculinity as, whether celebrated or condoned, imported goods and fashions were inevitably associated with urbanity. Many of the images of Priapus, as we have seen in Chapter One, sat somewhere between the two, for example, the Amiternum Couch (Figure 2). In some scenes, such as the Vicarello Goblet, the settings are largely rustic but often with accoutrements that suggest some sophistication such as carved pillars or silverware. Priapus represents rural traditions in a new and changing world and he is a part of the synthesis of the two competing worlds of traditional rusticity and urban sophistication.

Cicero, for example, embraces his own 'rusticity' as a symbol of his 'Romanness' in a courtroom rebuttal:

I shouldn't be surprised that I seem rustic to Clodius, since I can't wear a tunic that reaches to the wrist and a headband and purple garlands.<sup>437</sup>

The implication is clear: even if one is not born in Rome it is possible to be more 'Roman' by eschewing foreign luxury, and it is notable how similar the description of luxury clothing is to that of Virgil's description of the Trojans.<sup>438</sup> On the other hand, some Romans were proud of their sophistication; Ovid, for example, says he is glad to have been born when he was because 'we have

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<sup>437</sup> Cic. *Against Clodius and Curio*. 22. Trans. Corbeill 1997: 119.

<sup>438</sup> Hackworth Petersen 2009: 207 reminds us that the toga was also a very expensive item of clothing so the idea that eschewing foreign luxury in dress as a symbol of rusticity is a rhetorical trope.

culture and rusticity...has not lasted to our days' and in a courtroom Hortensius offered the retort that he would rather be effeminate than 'artless, loveless, pointless.'<sup>439</sup>

This reflects a new approach to defining manhood in the competitive urban world of the late republic and the empire where military prowess became less relevant and competition moved to the courts and the urban sphere. Men had to compete in verbal battles and show their intelligence, wealth and sophistication more than their ability to win wars. They still had to be aggressive and retain the soldierly values but they also had to become cosmopolitan, Masterson has called this combination the 'hallmark of elite manhood in the empire.'<sup>440</sup> It is worth noting that the most outwardly effeminate men such as Maecenas and Hortensius were already in positions of wealth and influence.<sup>441</sup> The luxury of the dinner party was the ideal place to represent this new social status and form of social interaction. Images that combine reminders of hyper-masculinity, such as Priapus, with luxury may be a representation of these concerns. Even in elegy which reflects these social changes through critique of traditional concepts of 'Romanness' and masculine aggression the urban world is never completely rejected, for example Tibullus uses military language to describe his relationship with his mistress.<sup>442</sup> Many of the other luxury images we have considered also contain these contrasting elements in some way or another.

Luxury and the lifestyle associated with it, despite the rhetoric that condemns it as emasculating and destructive, actually enhanced the social status of males and therefore their masculinity. Rather than straightforwardly adopting a Greek lifestyle, elite Roman males (closely followed by those wishing to improve their social standing) selected and modified the elements that suited their self-presentation best. Priapus represents the power of the Roman male in luxury settings; the power to indulge, the power over others' bodies and the power to use the culture of defeated nations to express oneself. Despite the rhetoric that surrounds luxury, the inviolability and supremacy of the elite Roman male, represented by Priapus, was never truly questioned.

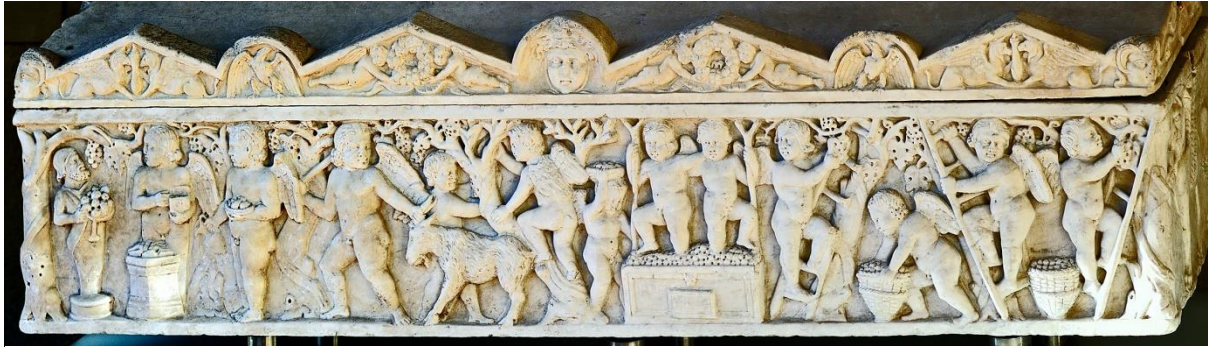
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<sup>439</sup> Ov. *Ars am.* 3.126-8; Gell 1.5.2-3 (quoted in Williams 1993: 173).

<sup>440</sup> Masterson 2014: 23-26.

<sup>441</sup> Williams 1993: 159.

<sup>442</sup> Lyne 1980: 71-73 discusses the distinctly Roman trait of 'militarizing' love and suggests that the elegists created their own militia dedicated to pleasure to replace the traditional military service.



**Figure 78:** Marble Sarcophagus showing a harvest. Late 1st Century CE. Rome, National Roman Museum.  
Photo: Euan Martin.

## A Luxurious Afterlife

Luxury and *paideia* were not only an important part of dining and living well but also of the symbolism around death and particularly the decoration of sarcophagi and funerary monuments. It is no coincidence that similar imagery is used for these two occasions that at first seem conceptually very distinct. Dining was intimately tied to death in Roman culture in several ways. Firstly, they were unrivalled as the two most significant events at which a family could display their wealth and education through luxury goods. Tombs and sarcophagi were often highly decorated in a similar way to Roman homes and often with similar themes. It was also traditional to commemorate the dead with lavish meals and many of the luxuries of the more run of the mill *convivium* were also associated with death and ritual. Finally, the Roman psyche associated enjoyment of life with death. It was a popular truism that it was important to live life to the full as death is inevitable, and Romans also saw links between over-indulgence and death; dining was one of the pleasures of life they hoped to continue in the afterlife.<sup>443</sup> In this context it is perhaps less surprising that Priapus should feature with some regularity on large and expensive sarcophagi. Sarcophagi representing Priapus frequently show a world of luxury similar to that found on drinking vessels and other luxury items of the late republic and early empire but the different context creates slightly different connotations. As Platt has demonstrated, tombs and burial customs are primarily about boundaries; between living and dead, and public and private.<sup>444</sup> We often find images of Priapus in such liminal spaces both because he can soften boundaries and mediate between worlds and also because he can offer some apotropaic protection. Sarcophagi in particular, embody this boundary creating a barrier between the living and dead, life and afterlife.

<sup>443</sup> See Zanker and Ewald 2012: 130-163, Turcan 1966 and Huskinson 1996: 30-35 for detailed discussions of the meanings of Bacchic scenes on sarcophagi.

<sup>444</sup> Platt 2017: 258.



Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 79:** Side detail of a marble sarcophagus showing Acteon myth.  
Paris, Louvre.

Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 296.

From the first century CE onwards decorated marble sarcophagi became popular for burials. These sarcophagi are luxury items in themselves made of costly materials and highly decorated. They would have cost a significant amount. Although the price would suggest they were limited to the very wealthy, evidence indicates that many were purchased by those we might think of as moderately wealthy or 'middle class'.<sup>445</sup> This suggests that they were culturally significant enough for families to spend a disproportionate amount of income on them. They are decorated with a wide variety of mythological images and some excellent recent studies have looked in detail at the significance of these representations, showing that different myths carried varying symbolism for the viewer.<sup>446</sup> Here, we will focus on the Bacchic decoration as this is where Priapus is depicted.

Images of Priapus on Roman sarcophagi are often associated with Bacchic themes and they tend to fall into three areas which all reflect images we have seen elsewhere; harvest festivals, scenes of happy peasants and celebrations of the *thiasos*. A sarcophagus in Rome illustrates the first type well; it shows erotes working to bring in the grape harvest while a herm of Priapus holding fruit in his tunic receives a sacrifice on an altar from two of the erotes (Figure 78). Many of the motifs in this scene are familiar to us from the rustic imagery explored in Chapter One; the erotes happily gather and trample the abundance of grapes that fill the scene, a goat is being led to Priapus' altar and offerings of apples and wine are being made to him. The scene has much in common with the fulcra of the Amiternum Couch which was also found in a funerary setting. Priapus in these scenes represents the abundance and pleasures of the simple life which were clearly important themes in funerary contexts, perhaps expressing that the joys of life continue even in death. The sarcophagus with the death of Acteon (Figure 79) is unusual in its incorporation of Priapus into the scene; it

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<sup>445</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012: 23-24.

<sup>446</sup> Newby 2016; Korjootian 1995.



**Figure 80:** Detail of Marble sarcophagus of Marconiana Severiana from Vigna Casali. 3rd century CE. Los Angeles, Getty Museum.

Photo:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus\\_Maconiana\\_Severiana\\_Getty\\_Villa\\_83.AA.275.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Sarcophagus_Maconiana_Severiana_Getty_Villa_83.AA.275.jpg) [accessed 28/04/18].

seems that, as well as eroticising the figures for the viewer, he evokes a pastoral landscape for the myth and is associated with the world of the peasant huntsmen shown on the side of the sarcophagus looking after the dogs.<sup>447</sup> We will see in the next chapter that Priapus was strongly connected to this kind of idyllic pastoral landscape.

Similar themes seem to explain Priapus' presence on sarcophagi that show the joyous cavorting of the *thiasos*, for example the child's sarcophagus of Marconiana Severiana which shows the *thiasos* in a chaotic composition with a youthful, drunk Bacchus in the centre, a sleeping Ariadne and a herm of Priapus on the far right of the scene (Figure 80).<sup>448</sup> Here the face of Ariadne has been only roughly carved which implies it was intended as a portrait of the deceased. Since Ariadne is not the focus of this scene Zanker and Ewald have argued that it is less about the narrative episode of the discovery of Ariadne that we find in domestic decoration and she should be read as a standard part of the iconography of the *thiasos*.<sup>449</sup> Therefore, we should imagine the deceased to be like Ariadne, relaxing in this world of abundance and happiness, perhaps even finding eternal love in the form of Bacchus.<sup>450</sup> Sarcophagi are unusual in that they are the only context in which we can associate images of Priapus specifically with women and children; in this case the inscription suggests the casket was for a young girl.<sup>451</sup> To some extent, this suggests the image could be interpreted as a

<sup>447</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012: 295-298.

<sup>448</sup> Koch 1988: 36-40.

<sup>449</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012:132.

<sup>450</sup> Newby 2016: 306-7.

<sup>451</sup> See Huskinson 1996 for list of Bacchic themes and erotes on child sarcophagi.

Image removed due to permissions issue.

**Figure 81:** Marble sarcophagus with Bacchic Scene. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Zanker and Ewald 2012: 241.

representation of fertility and renewal in these contexts rather than primarily operating as an expression of masculine power. However, these images do show us that the visual language of masculine culture was pervasive in a wide variety of societal contexts where displaying status was important.

In Chapter One we encountered an unusual sarcophagus in Naples that has garnered much attention because of the explicit sexual activity it depicts and was an inspiration for Famin and his contemporaries (Figure 81). It shows an old, bearded, drunken man being supported in the centre of the scene, who is often interpreted as Priapus because of his large phallus visible under the long tunic. At the right hand of the scene a female faun attempts to penetrate herself with a Priapus-like herm with animalistic facial features and on the left a faun couple are about to engage in intercourse. Other typical features from the Bacchic sarcophagi are also depicted such as a sleeping Ariadne, Pan and an array of satyrs and maenads. The background features a variety of motifs associated with cultic activity such as torches, curtains and even a small shrine building. Zanker and Ewald describe the scene as a night devoted to the worship of Pan and suggest the presence of Priapus sets the erotic tone.<sup>452</sup> Although this imagery may seem inappropriate for a funerary context it very much reflects the lively Bacchic decoration on luxury ware for dining where abandon and eroticism are important themes. The drunkenness of Priapus in this image demonstrates the power of Bacchus to bring happiness and ties this imagery to that of the *convivium* where we have seen drunkenness was common. The relaxed softness of the body through drunkenness is the opposite of the rigidity for which Priapus is commonly known, even his large penis is flaccid, and implies complete immersion in this fantasy world. This may mirror the fact that the decoration on

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<sup>452</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012: 139.

sarcophagi are less concerned with representing phallic power and more concerned with the luxury that the power brings later in life, or in the afterlife.

The association between death and opulence is clearly a theme of Trimalchio's *cena* in the *Satyricon* which ends with an enactment of Trimalchio's funeral. As Arrowsmith has said, the banquet scene constantly plays with themes of mortality and money, surfeit and sickness, and, impotence and plenty.<sup>453</sup> Indulgence and death seem to go hand in hand suggesting an awareness that overindulgence in life can shorten it but also suggesting that there is some glory to be found in the display of wealth that death can bring. In the case of Trimalchio this may be particularly pertinent because as a freedman he is somewhat excluded from the upper echelons of society in many other ways. These sarcophagi are used across social statuses and were a way for a wide range of people to take part in the dominant elite culture. The concept of living life to the full was important at Roman dinners and the luxury decoration frequently reflects this, for example a pair of silver cups from Boscoreale shows skeletons playing with theatre masks and imitating philosophers with the caption 'live life while you can for tomorrow is uncertain' (Figure 82). As Luther Martin has shown, in the Roman world the happy Bacchic afterlife on sarcophagi is a logical extension of a happy worldly existence played out at banquets and in erotic encounters.<sup>454</sup>

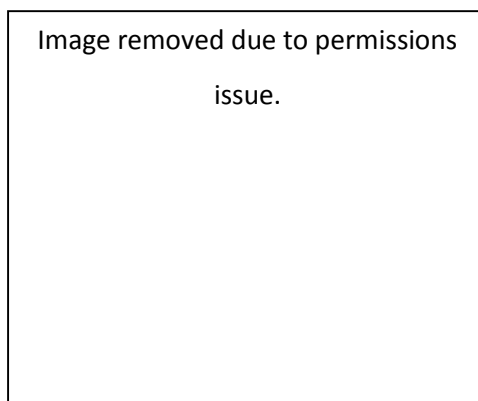
A small number of inscriptions suggest that as a deity Priapus may have been associated with death but the evidence is scant and there is no way to know if these dedications come from committed individuals or part of a wider cult.<sup>455</sup> However, it is clear that as part of the Bacchic world Priapus was a significant figure in evoking a blissful life, whether a lively *thiasos* that reflects the *convivium* or a paradisiac idyll that reflects a perfect 'golden age'. The virility and fertility of his image is life affirming in the decoration of these luxury funerary objects that in turn reflected the luxuries of contemporary life through their decoration. We see in these sarcophagi the imagery used to suffuse the dining room with suggestions of luxury and comfort applied to the funerary sphere. This is testament to the importance of *paideia* throughout visual culture and the ways in which the Hellenistic language of luxury could be repurposed by the Romans for a wide variety of uses.

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<sup>453</sup> Arrowsmith 1966: 304.

<sup>454</sup> Martin 1987: 96.

<sup>455</sup> Parker 1988: 16. For example, see *CIL* 5 3634.



**Figure 82:** Silver cup from the Boscoreale Treasure. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. Paris, Louvre.  
Photo: [www.louvre.fr/en/mediainage/goblets-aux-squelettes-0](http://www.louvre.fr/en/mediainage/goblets-aux-squelettes-0) [accessed 28/04/18].

## Conclusion

Despite the rhetoric, in the Roman world, luxury was not always a negative influence especially when taken in consideration with the power structures of Roman society. It maintained hierarchies as much as it threatened them but, most significantly, it was a new way of defining them. Priapus' ambiguous nature, as we have seen in earlier chapters, was used as a symbol of traditional rusticity and laughed at because of this but he also plays a role in the Hellenistic world of refinement and taste. He provides viewers with a space in which to indulge their fantasies because this semi-mythical past he invokes, as we have referred to elsewhere, is very flexible. Priapus' image helps to bring familiarity to a potentially dangerous space by siting it in the imagined 'Roman' countryside of the past and by representing masculinity. It also brings the Hellenistic fantasy into the Italian landscape of a distant time.

We have seen that, although the rhetoric often likens indulgence of desires to slavery, luxury in the Roman world was actually a way to bring some structure and control to the constantly shifting social hierarchy. Education, imperialism, wealth, and voyeurism are all important parts of Roman luxury and only masculine social elites were in a position to enjoy all of these. Nonetheless, there was still room for manoeuvre which allowed outsiders to become part of Roman society through wealth or literary talent, and allowed others to emulate the upper classes in a variety of media. However, elites could also keep moving the goal posts and, whilst using luxury to distinguish themselves from other social groups, were also using 'Greek' luxury as a way to compete with each other, often for political favour either amongst peers under the republic or the emperor later on.

Despite the 'feminine' nature of much luxury ware it was actually very important to Roman concepts of masculinity, reinforcing the pre-eminence of the penetrative male whilst also allowing the male to challenge accepted models of Roman masculinity. This led to tension between the moralists on one hand and poets on the other. Priapus represents the 'male' in these images and thus keeps male power and privilege at the forefront of images imbued with connotations of foreign and mythological luxury and softness.

Bodily pleasures were clearly very important in this mythological world, as was imagination. This fantasy world is therefore, primarily about the aesthetic and emotional responses it invokes. It is a world of softness and this also makes it dangerous for those immersing themselves in it. The fantasy provides a place for people to indulge within bounds acceptable to society so that and as long as they return to their stable life of *virtus* afterwards. There is a sense in which Priapus brings this fantasy down to earth. As we have already noted, he is a figure who often seems out of place in these images and he certainly does not fit the aesthetic and sensual ideals of this fantasy world. Even though he is partially alive in some of these images, he is not fully removed from the bonds of his herm-like legs and in this respect he may offer a reminder that this fantasy is not real and is inherently dangerous, if even he can be swept up in the softness of it. In many ways, Priapus is the intermediary between the gods and men and he brings some of the luxuries from the mythological world to the real world, for example an abundance of fruits, wine and sexual freedom, this is reflected in his common visual traits.

It would appear that in death, as in the microcosm of life at the *convivium*, Priapus was associated with the pleasures of life whether that is in the form of abundant foods, luxury goods or sex and voyeurism. As part of the Bacchic *thiasos* he exemplifies the potential for happiness both in this world and the next brought about by Roman cultural dominance. The sarcophagi demonstrate that that language of luxury was used in all walks of life as the cultural dominance of Rome allowed for Hellenistic imagery to be repurposed in many ways. This luxury mythological world is often set within a distinctly mythological landscape and it is to the significance of Priapus within landscape imagery that we turn our attention to in the next chapter.

## Chapter Four: Landscapes and Performance

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**Figure 83:** Fresco with myth of Polyphemus from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

In the *triclinium* of the House of the Priest Amandus (I.7.7) at Pompeii, a fresco panel in a highly decorated third-style room incorporates Priapus into a mythological landscape (Figure 83). The painting shows a rocky landscape in the foreground with a large tree at the centre and the sea surrounds the land. The presence of various familiar *topoi*, including sheep, water, rocky ground and pan pipes, show this to be a pastoral scene. In fact, it depicts a scene from the story of Polyphemus' failed wooing of the nymph Galatea. Polyphemus, the monstrous shepherd of Homer's *Odyssey*, sits in the centre of the scene beneath the tree serenading Galatea who sits partially draped watching attentively from the back of a sea creature. A crudely carved ithyphallic herm of Priapus sits alongside the couple on top of a column, in the background a ship arrives on the right and a temple-like building can be seen on the left.

Although there is a mythological narrative to this image, the elaborate setting of this scene reflects an interest in depicting landscapes that became highly popular in domestic settings through the first

centuries BCE and CE.<sup>456</sup> Such landscapes can vary in subject matter, but they are unified in theme; namely timeless landscapes that celebrate the idyllic scenery and rural activities as much as the narrative, if indeed there is a narrative at all. There is, however, much ambiguity in these works which can simultaneously represent nature and civilisation, past and present, and luxury and austerity. We have seen throughout the previous chapters that Priapus is particularly associated with the boundaries between culture and primitivism or reality and artifice, so it comes as no surprise that his image is, as here, frequently part of landscape scenes.

In this particular image, Priapus functions in multiple ways, all of which will be relevant throughout this chapter. As an image associated with traditional rural cult, he evokes rusticity, piety and archaism, thus helping the viewer to identify the setting as a mythological, pastoral world and to understand something of Polyphemus' crude character. His ithyphallic appearance heightens the erotic tension in a story of unrequited love. Priapus' visual connection with the world of Bacchus signals that this is a boundary world of leisure and abundance removed from reality, thus a space of potential pleasure and risk. Finally, the incorporation of Priapus plays upon the tensions in the story between rusticity and civilisation; along with the building, he is clearly a man-made addition to the predominantly natural landscape and suggests that the natural world has been altered by the presence of man. These multiple layers of interpretation suggest that landscape in Roman art was a setting for highly complex and sophisticated discourse that goes beyond a simple function as decorative depictions of 'nature'.

In this chapter we will explore the significance of Priapus in the context of the popularity of landscape in Roman art and in real landscapes, such as domestic gardens. Necessarily, this will involve bringing together the themes developed throughout this thesis. And it will be essential, therefore, to revisit images, motifs and ideas from the preceding chapters to understand the role of Priapus in landscape settings and in Roman culture more widely. This will enable us to connect the rustic Priapus of cult and agricultural industry that we examined in Chapter One with the pastoral Priapus of sophisticated fantasy landscapes that we will examine here. Particularly, throughout this chapter we will develop the idea that Priapus is a liminal figure who blurs the boundaries between fantasy and reality, history and mythology, and luxury and rusticity. Significantly, landscapes depicted or created in domestic settings were constructed and self-contained boundary spaces in which the elite Roman male could both assert dominance and risk losing control whilst maintaining a

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<sup>456</sup> Silberberg 1980: 25.



sense of distance from 'real life'. The need to balance between competing ideologies was ever present in Roman society as men strove constantly to display their status by creating a persona which alluded clearly to all the relevant cultural *mores* whilst avoiding appearing to over-indulge in any. Too much or too little could lead to political and social criticism. Landscapes, both real and imagined, provided the ideal setting to construct or perform Roman identity in bordered and conceptually distant spaces that allowed for reality and artifice to be seamlessly combined.

We will begin this chapter by exploring the roles that Priapus can play in different types of Roman landscape as depicted in painting and sculpture. This discussion will draw on the cultural associations of Priapus' image with which we are already familiar from previous chapters in this thesis. We will see that landscape scenes could provide 'windows' onto other worlds. Within such landscapes, Priapus could be a fertility god of the Bacchic world, an apotropaion and a marker of foreign luxury, amongst many other things. This multifaceted nature places him at the heart of cultural discourses about masculinity, tradition, imperial expansion and luxury. We will then move on to look at the complexity of landscape imagery and the part that the image of Priapus plays in both creating and breaking down a frame within 'real' spaces such as the garden, villa and theatre. We will see that the frame of landscape often created a world in which ideas about identity, culture and society could be explored and status could be performed. Understanding Priapus' image within these spaces will allow us to look at the cultural significance of landscape imagery within Roman life, particularly the life of the cultural elites, and help us to understand why Roman landscapes, both real and imagined, and the ambiguous space in between became popular in domestic decoration.

## Roman Landscapes

We have noted elsewhere in this thesis that arts considered 'decorative' are often viewed as inferior to mythological narratives in art history; this is also true of many landscape scenes, particularly those considered 'pastoral'.<sup>457</sup> However, the fact that different types of landscape scene gained popularity in domestic settings, and in a variety of media, in the first centuries BCE and CE suggests that their development may have been motivated by similar cultural imperatives, and that they are likely highly relevant to our understanding of self-presentation in the domestic sphere.<sup>458</sup> In fact, understanding the Roman approach to landscape offers an important insight into many of the

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<sup>457</sup> Silberberg 1980: 1.

<sup>458</sup> Silberberg 1980: 25.

discourses in Roman culture of the late republic and early empire that we have explored through this thesis.

When we speak of ‘landscapes’ in Roman art, this does not refer to a modern sense of landscape as a representation of a ‘real’ view, but instead highly artificial constructions that feature and repeat a combination of stylized natural elements that suggest the scene is taking place outdoors. Usually scholars speak of distinct genres of landscape scene: sacral-idyllic or pastoral scenes, villa landscapes and Nilotic landscapes. These different forms of landscape are often treated as distinct subject matter but, in fact, the imagery, context and interpretations can overlap significantly.<sup>459</sup> Roman landscapes, in all variants, are spaces of fantasy, ambiguity and blurred boundaries; often Priapus’ presence reminds us of this.

Many of the typical motifs of Roman landscape scenes are described by Pliny the Elder in his account of the introduction of landscape painting by Studius:

[..] who first introduced the most attractive fashion of painting walls with pictures of country houses and porticoes and landscape gardens, groves, woods, hills, fish-ponds, canals, rivers, coasts, and whatever anybody could desire, together with various sketches of people going for a stroll or sailing in a boat or on land going to country houses riding on asses or in carriages, and also people fishing and fowling or hunting or even gathering the vintage. His works include splendid villas approached by roads across marshes men tottering and staggering along carrying women on their shoulders for a bargain, and a number of humorous drawings of that sort besides, extremely wittily designed.<sup>460</sup>

We will see that all of these *topoi*, in addition to herms of Priapus, occur time and again in a variety of Roman landscape images.<sup>461</sup> This repetition of images creates an iconographic conservatism that suggests an unchanging, temporally distant landscape with obvious appeal to proponents of

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<sup>459</sup> For example, Versluys 2002 has singled out Nilotic landscapes and Silberberg 1980 has focused on sacral-idyllic landscapes.

<sup>460</sup> Plin. *HN*. 35. 116–117. It is worth noting this description is contemporary with the popularity of landscape painting and further highlights the contemporary fashion for such scenes. See also Ling 1991 for a discussion of the origins of the genre.

<sup>461</sup> Mayer 2012: 284 describes how standardised images could have multiple meanings.

traditionalism who used images of Priapus' rustic cult for similar purposes, as well as those looking to evoke a more poetic rustic fantasy.<sup>462</sup> Our interest in landscape in this chapter, however, goes beyond the conventions of pattern-book content.<sup>463</sup> Landscapes may seem to represent wildness or natural features but they are, in fact, culturally constructed artifices, much like images of Priapus. Although they may often appear to show panoramic, expansive and naturalistic views, landscapes represent a deliberate choice to focus on a particular scene packed with meaningful allusions; this means that there is a border or frame, and a suggestion of control over the parameters and content of the image.<sup>464</sup> As we have seen in previous chapters, 'control' was a key attribute of elite masculinity and it was used to establish supremacy over others. We will see throughout this chapter that this extended beyond individual bodies and acts to the performance of Roman manhood on the domestic, public and international stage. Landscape was a key space in which control could be demonstrated, but also, inevitably, subverted.

The way in which landscapes play with notions of artifice and reality makes them useful tools for representing cultural discourses as they can operate in multifaceted ways. Depending on the cultural interpretations of viewers, they can simultaneously represent a variety of places and times. In a Roman context this means that they can represent, mythological and real, Greek, Egyptian and Italian, past and present, countryside and city, something that Annette Giesecke calls 'a-temporality'.<sup>465</sup> In addition, landscapes construct dialogue between the, often conflicting, ideals and visual elements of the composition by framing them within the same space. Essentially, despite initial appearances which suggest distance and wildness, landscapes are very sophisticated comments on man's relationship to, or dominance over, nature. As Nancy Worman has said 'landscape is a constructed entity; one shaped by its representation as a meaningful organisation of elements that symbolise political and aesthetic values....These fantasies of imposing order on an unruly world achieve an artistic dream.... if not social or political reality.'<sup>466</sup> As we shall see, this applies both to pictorial representations and those 'real' landscapes constructed in private

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<sup>462</sup> Leader-Newby 2004: 137 suggests that this conservatism relates to aristocratic concepts of *paideia* and traditionalism. Refer to Chapter One for a discussion of Priapus and rural tradition.

<sup>463</sup> There is also an ongoing debate about the potential Hellenistic origins of landscape painting which is beyond the scope of this thesis which focuses on these images in Roman contexts, see Schefold 1960: 90 for arguments for Hellenistic origin; Silberberg 1980: 21 and Kuttner 1995: 130 for arguments against.

<sup>464</sup> Andrews 1999: 5-7.

<sup>465</sup> Giesecke 2016: 229.

<sup>466</sup> Worman 2015: 10.

properties by wealthy Romans, where the ambiguity between image and reality offered by landscapes is used to full potential in creating spaces of performance and pleasure.

In both the painting and the poetry concerning idyllic landscapes the language is deliberately vague and ambivalent. This allows the fabricated landscape to represent an idealised, distant world but also allows it to address some issues of contemporary reality for its viewers. Priapus was often a key way of signalling some of these discourses or tensions in art works. The growing financial capital of non-elites both in Rome and across the provinces, changes to the political system under the emperors and the expansion of the empire all led to identity anxiety for elite males which meant that displaying taste, tradition and masculinity was of the utmost importance. Within ambiguous landscapes there were many threats to identity but they were contained within a frame and the image of Priapus could represent the tension in a controlled environment, and ultimately allow the elite male to demonstrate his supremacy. Particularly troublesome, as we have seen in Chapter Three, was a perception that the *nouveaux riches* and the new citizens of the wider empire were not 'Roman' enough, that is to say, not versed in Roman traditions and values. However, the adoption of landscapes in the form of gardens and decoration in a wide variety of property sizes, as well as the interchange of imagery between the domestic sphere and popular performance suggests that landscape imagery had cultural capital beyond the narrow group of social elites that dominate the discourse.<sup>467</sup>

As an ambiguous figure whose image could be manipulated to address a variety of contemporary concerns, Priapus' presence in landscapes should encourage us to open up our interpretations of landscape beyond 'decorative' or 'idyllic' to seek more nuanced and sophisticated meanings. Throughout this thesis we have explored potential interpretations of Priapus' image, we will now use these interpretations as themes to seek to understand Priapus' part in landscape images. Many Roman landscapes contain a complex array of allusions, for example to literature, other art works, and 'real' spaces and places. By reflecting on the image of Priapus in these contexts we can deepen our understanding of the relevance of his image in domestic spaces.

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<sup>467</sup> See Wallace-Hadrill 2008: 315-355 and discussion in Chapter Three about the ways in which luxury could transcend social classes.

## Rusticity and Sophistication

In the painting from the House of the Priest Amandus, Priapus represents civilisation in a deliberately rustic landscape. This is a common theme in landscape scenes, whether sacral-idyllic landscapes that feature sacred spaces and worship, those that seem to show a more practical pastoral world of herdsmen and peasant farmers or those that show mythological stories like Polyphemus and Galatea. All represent constructed fantasies that play upon the tensions between concepts of traditional self-sufficiency and urban convenience, allowing patrons and viewers playfully to incorporate a mythical pastoral idyll and pious past within their luxury, leisure settings. The hedonism of the world of Bacchus and Venus is carefully tempered within the defined space of the landscape. We will see that through depictions of tradition, escapism, love and exoticism in these landscapes, boundaries are broken down and reasserted using the ambiguity and humour of the image of Priapus.

### ***Polyphemus and Galatea: Mythology in Landscape***

Priapus and Polyphemus seem a natural combination in landscape painting. They share many unrefined qualities and belong to the same distant pastoral world but Priapus' figure also suggests a tension between civilisation and the rusticity of the pastoral landscape in such scenes. As a shepherd and Homeric character, Polyphemus sits on the boundary of the worlds of the pastoral countryside and epic mythology, he is emblematic of a traditional pastoral existence disrupted, first by love and then by epic. This is typical of the Roman approach to the imaginary pastoral world inherited from the Hellenistic poets; the idyll is constantly disrupted and renegotiated, and, in many cases, the figure of Priapus is a tool for highlighting exactly this. Besides Polyphemus, Priapus serves to emphasise the rusticity of the shepherd in both positive and negative lights, allowing the sophisticated Roman audience to play with the contrasts inherent in this narrative.

In the story of Polyphemus, the conflict between nature and civilisation is represented by Polyphemus and Galatea respectively. The story is also a conflict between coarseness and beauty, passion and distance, and pastoral and epic worlds. In the painting from the house of the Priest Amandus, Priapus highlights these tensions; he exaggerates the rusticity of Polyphemus' world by associating it with crude archaism and firmly placing it in a pastoral genre. Further, he emphasises the distance of that world from Galatea, both spatially, as she is on the opposite side of the painting from the herm and on the sea rather than the land, and also visually as she is elegant, floating on the waves with her billowing drapery, while Polyphemus holds his shepherd's crook and is associated with a herm that is no better than a phallic stick-man. Priapus' image also suggests the sexual

passion of Polyphemus through the phallicism whilst mirroring the unfulfilment of his lust in the static herm form. In literature, in the *Metamorphoses* Ovid emphasises the distance between the two characters when he shows Polyphemus trying to become more 'civilised' to please his love.

Now love-lorn Polyphemus cared for his looks, cared earnestly to  
please; Now with a rake he combed his matted hair, and with a  
sickle tames his shaggy beard and studied his fierce features in a  
pool and practised to compose them. His urge to kill his fierceness  
and lust for blood ceased<sup>468</sup>

The humour of this passage arises from the way in which the true nature of Polyphemus as a creature of the rustic world is highlighted by the instruments he chooses for his grooming – a rake as a comb, a pool as a mirror and a sickle as scissors or a razor. It is clear that he will never be accepted by Galatea or, by extension, the rest of the world. Ultimately this leads to the epitome of uncivilised behaviour, the irrational killing of Acis.

This context casts the statue of Priapus in an ambiguous light; Priapus is man-made and we know from previous chapters that the sculpture of Priapus is also a mark of superior masculinity, intellectual wit and the artistry of urban society, all of which are distinctly absent from the portrayal of Polyphemus. However, in many ways Priapus could be seen to reflect the character of Polyphemus, both are a larger than life representation of something unrefined and their crude appearance emphasises this. Ovid's poem is full of imagery that alludes to the rustic nature of Polyphemus; he plays the pipes and sings, he tends sheep and makes cheeses. This suggests that Polyphemus is in a sophisticated landscape, a literary landscape. The description highlights typical traits of Roman poetry that allude to the bucolic poetry of Theocritus, a Hellenistic poet of the third century BCE who strongly influenced the imagery of the rustic world in literature and we can see many of the same tropes in the visual record also, including in this painting from the House of the Priest Amandus.<sup>469</sup> Polyphemus' offering to Galatea in Ovid is familiar from the imagery of priapic poems:

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<sup>468</sup> Ov. *Met.* 13.765-769. Trans. Melville 1986.

<sup>469</sup> Hunter 2006: vii-xx.

Apples I have loading the boughs and I have golden grapes and purple in my vineyards – all for you. Your hands shall gather luscious strawberries. In woodland shade in autumn you shall pick cherries and plums.....This whole flock is mine, and many are wandering the valleys as well, many hidden by the woods, many penned in the caves. If you asked me I could not tell you how many there are: a poor man counts his flocks. You can see, you need not merely believe me, how they can hardly move their legs with their full udders. There are newborn lambs in the warm sheepfolds, and kids too, of the same age, in other pens, and I always have snow-white milk: some of it kept for drinking, and some with rennet added to curdle it.<sup>470</sup>

This closely resembles many of the descriptions of offerings made to Priapus and suggests we are to imagine them as part of the same landscape:

In spring a many-tinted wreath is placed upon me; in summer's heat ruddy grain; in autumn a luscious grape cluster with vine shoots and in the bitter cold the pale green olive. The tender she-goat bears from my pasture to the town milk-distended udders; the well fattened lamb from my sheepfolds sends back its owner with a heavy handful of money; and the tender calf, 'midst its mothers lowings, sheds its blood before the temple of the gods.<sup>471</sup>

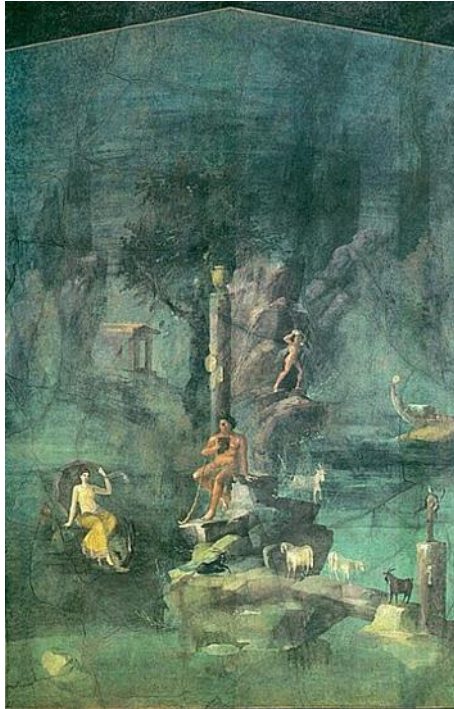
Despite the humour in these literary representations which may seem to mock primitivism, there is much to suggest that the world of pastoral imagery was seen as an ideal of harmony between man, nature and the gods.<sup>472</sup> Further, we have seen in Chapter One that for all the critique in some literature there were many aspects of rusticity that were admired and seen to be *exempla* of Roman *mores*. Therefore, Priapus is both a way of reinforcing the ideals of rusticity, piety and simplicity, and simultaneously mocking them, essentially this allows urban sophisticates to 'have their cake and eat it.'

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<sup>470</sup> Ov. *Met.* 13.812-830. Trans. Melville 1986.

<sup>471</sup> Priap. 87 in Smithers and Burton 1995.

<sup>472</sup> Bergmann 2002: 88.



**Figure 84:** Polyphemus fresco from the Villa at Boscorecase. Late 1st century BCE. New York, Metropolitan Museum.

Photo: <https://www.metmuseum.org/toah/works-of-art/20.192.17/> [accessed 28/04/18].

The painting from the House of Priest Amandus at Pompeii closely resembles one from the so-called Villa of Agrippa Postumus at Boscorecase which was decorated to represent the most fashionable tastes in villa décor at that time and, therefore, demonstrating the latest artistic aims of the Roman social elite.<sup>473</sup> This fresco also shows Polyphemus and Galatea in a rocky, pastoral landscape surrounded by sheep, goats and a herm that, given the strong similarities between the two paintings, is most likely also a representation of Priapus but in a more refined form (Figure 84). The violence of Polyphemus is directly depicted in this scene which shows a second narrative in the background in which Polyphemus appears to be throwing rocks at Odysseus' ship. It has been argued that this brings epic into the pastoral world, and it is worth noting that, although the violence is absent, the scene from the House of the Priest Amandus also shows a ship arriving in the background.<sup>474</sup> It would seem clear that the epic characters are here intruding into an idyllic world and the viewer knows that they will bring destruction with them. It is possible that this is a comment

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<sup>473</sup> For more on the discussion about the ownership of this villa see Wyler 2006: 251-6.

<sup>474</sup> Winsor Leach 1992: 80.



on the damaging forces of civilisation, represented by epic, which bring violence and hardship to pastoral idyll.

There may be parallels in the elegists who try to keep state life away from their own romantic, rustic idyll. Tibullus in the opening poem of Book 1, for example, rejects wealth and the associated military obligations and Propertius in poem 1.6 turns down serving with his patron in favour of his mistress.<sup>475</sup> In 3.3 Propertius brings us back to the theme of pastoral versus epic when he recounts a dream in which Apollo tells him to pursue pastoral themes rather than epic and he is taken to a grotto filled with iconic pastoral objects such as Pan's pipes and Venus' doves while the muses make a *thyrsus*, string a lyre and make flower garlands.<sup>476</sup> All of these objects are familiar from depictions of Priapus in landscape settings. As a man-made piece of art and a recognisable figure from luxury ware Priapus is also a reminder of civilisation or urban worlds; viewers may even have observed these landscape paintings at the *convivium* while drinking from silver cups featuring herms of Priapus in a luxurious numinous landscape, like the Vicarello Goblet (Figure 54); we can imagine how his image in these landscape scenes may serve as a reminder of the constant urban-rustic tension at play in pastoral settings. This also allows the image of Priapus in these landscapes to be interpreted as playing up the inherent humour in this tension: we have seen that Polyphemos is laughable because of his rusticity but, on the other hand, the notion of a sophisticated urban elegist like Propertius actually living in the rural world is equally absurd. As Eleanor Windsor Leach has articulated; pastoralism is nothing more than a witty and sometimes self-satirical positioning in a role conspicuously foreign to an elegiac poet's true sensibilities.<sup>477</sup> This is also true of the patron commissioning such deliberately rustic themed art for his home. As we have seen in Chapter Two, Priapus was an appropriate figure for laughing at the highly artificial contrast between the sophisticated, luxurious city and the backwards, modest countryside because he was created to stand as an emblem for the rural world by the high culture of the urban elites.

### ***Country Peasants and Sacral Idyllic Landscapes***

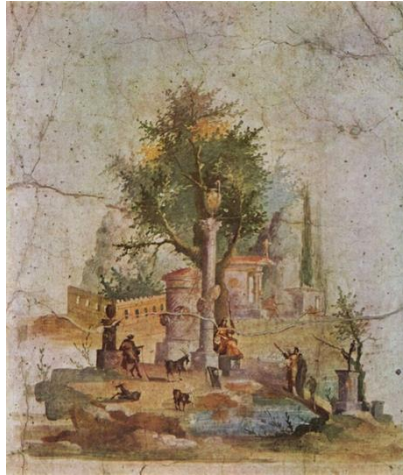
One of the most well-known examples of sacral idyllic wall painting comes from Cubiculum 16 of the villa at Boscotrecase. The panel painting shows a sacred tree surrounded by architectural elements such as columns and walls, and some worshippers crossing a bridge over a pool to reach an

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<sup>475</sup> Tib. 1.1; Prop. 1.6.

<sup>476</sup> Prop. 3.3.

<sup>477</sup> Winsor Leach 1980: 49.



**Figure 85:** Fresco of a sacral idyllic scene from the villa at Boscoreale. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Pompejanischer Maler um 10/20 [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons [accessed 15/04/18].

enthroned female deity (Figure 85). The scene is watched by a shepherd with some goats and a herm of Priapus on top of a column. It is unusual to see Priapus accompanying any female deity other than Venus or nymphs, which suggests his function in this scene is as one of many elements that combine to give the ultimate numinous experience; every element of this composition suggests sacred spaces and rural piety.<sup>478</sup> In particular, the herm of Priapus, as a frequent marker of sacred space in landscape images and an indicator of blurred boundaries, signals to the viewer that this is a special space on the boundaries of the mythical and indeterminate in time. This sense of physical and temporal distance and the overall appearance of contentment in simplicity are key attributes of sacral idyllic and bucolic landscapes.<sup>479</sup> These landscapes strongly resemble the literary landscapes of pastoral poetry rather than the actual Italian countryside and they, therefore, are symbolic of longstanding traditions and the complex interplay between Hellenistic models and Roman artistic production.<sup>480</sup> Priapus is clearly one of the typical features of this ambiguous world in the literature and this is reflected in the visual landscapes.<sup>481</sup>

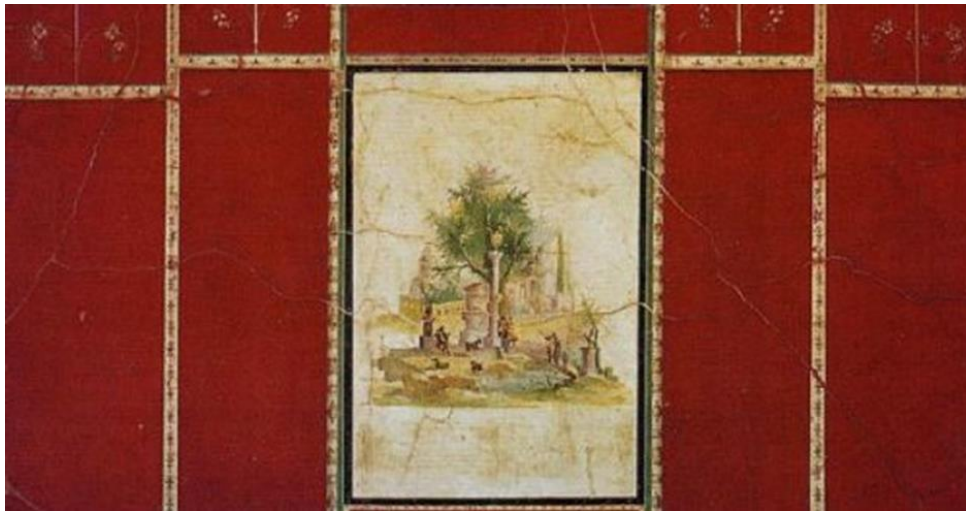
The distance in these landscapes creates a sense of possibility, idealism and mysticism but creating this appearance also emphasises the artificiality of the landscapes. For example, at Boscoreale the

<sup>478</sup> Silberberg 1980: 5 discusses how difficult it is to identify specific deities in sacral-idyllic scenes. It seems likely that in this case it may be Cybele.

<sup>479</sup> In this chapter I follow Hubbard 1998 in viewing the pastoral and sacral-idyllic as conventions that can be referenced in a variety of media rather than as strictly defined genres.

<sup>480</sup> Ling 1999: 101 suggests sacral-idyllic painting is the closest visual analogy to the landscape of Virgil's *Eclogues*.

<sup>481</sup> For example Virg. *Ecl.* 7 and Tib. 1.1.



**Figure 86:** Painted wall of *Cubiculum* 16 at Boscotrecase. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.

Photo: <https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fresco-Boscotrecase.jpg> [accessed 15/04/18].

landscapes in *Cubiculum* 16 are set into frames that highlight the flatness of the wall (Figure 86). The effect of distance is particularly effective in black rooms with floating scenes, such as the *triclinium* at the Villa Farnesina where friezes and vignettes seem to be dreamily scattered onto black walls.<sup>482</sup> It is clear there is no attempt in such rooms to render a 'realistic' depiction of space or landscape. This lack of physical grounding reflects the temporal ambiguity of landscapes and it suggests that Roman landscapes are more concerned with concepts of piety, tradition and culture than reality.<sup>483</sup> Within the landscape itself, Priapus also helps to create this sense of distance, he frequently marks the transition into a different world either in a practical sense through the positioning of his image in liminal boundary spaces or through his inclusion in images that are a gateway into either an imagined past or a mythological world. Although these worlds are distant, Priapus grounds them in a world of men as well as gods, and we see peasants going about their business in them, in the context of domestic decoration Priapus is helping to bring the world of the gods closer to mortals.

The effect of this visual distancing is to create a world in which tradition, piety and pleasure exist in, what is frequently termed, a 'golden age' that, as we saw in Chapter One, has been said to reflect an Augustan ideal.<sup>484</sup> That is not to say that these images are directly promoted by the state but they do reflect an interest in reinstating traditional festivals and temples alongside an optimism in peace and

<sup>482</sup> Clarke 1991: 53; Schefold 1960: 88-92. Clarke has highlighted that the décor of this room emphasises the fact it is all representation through the flattening of the frames and Schefold has argued that the unconventional use of space heightens the mysticism of the scene by removing human logic.

<sup>483</sup> Spencer 2010; Peters 1963; Breed 2006.

<sup>484</sup> Zanker 1988.

Image removed due to permissions  
issue.

**Figure 87:** Marble panel of rustic scene with Priapus. 1st century CE. Munich, Glyptothek. Photo: Wünsche 2016: 159.

stability.<sup>485</sup> Sacral idyllic landscapes certainly fit this ideal in that they present unchanging landscapes, in which even the weather and seasons are constant and indeterminate, that repeat motifs associated with tradition in the first century BCE.<sup>486</sup> Priapus might be regarded as one of those very conventional motifs in these scenes but his image is rarely so straightforward. Priapus' herm is often set at the edge of the landscape in these scenes (for example the Boscotrecase fresco Figure 85), as a figure associated with the margins of civilisation, the frenzied Bacchic world and disruption it could be that he subliminally suggests the wildness just off set in these landscapes, or the real world waiting to encroach on these idylls.<sup>487</sup>

As well as landscape painting, decorative plaques in marble showing bucolic landscapes were also popular. Priapus commonly features in these as a deity, in the form of a herm, worshipped at a shrine in the background. An example from the Munich Glyptothek mirrors the effect of the sacral idyllic whilst providing a more grounded and less ethereal sense (Figure 87). A herd of cows grazes in the bottom of the scene while a crumbling rocky outcrop supports a herm of Priapus, a dog and a nude man resting on a tree. The nudity of the figure suggests that this is not supposed to represent reality but the rest of the motifs seem to foreground a desire to show a more active and detailed rural world linked to the scenes of pious peasants we examined in Chapter One.

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<sup>485</sup> See Winsor Leach 1980: 55, Wyler 2006: 251 and Silberberg-Pierce 1993: 29 for examples of scholars associating sacral idyllic landscapes with imperial tastes and ideals.

<sup>486</sup> Peters 1963: 193.

<sup>487</sup> Heinemann 2011 also suggests that in the 'Satyr Play Reliefs' Priapus' herm acts as a border; Spencer 2010: 20 refers to the potential wildness just out of view in these landscapes.



**Figure 88:** Marble relief with Priapus and Pan. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.

Photo: Sailko [CC BY 3.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/3.0/>)], from Wikimedia Commons [accessed 15/04/18].

Commonly, the landscapes in marble relief add a mythological element, for example a relief from Pompeii shows Pan riding a donkey accompanied by a dog and a Priapus in a rocky outcrop with a tree and columns suggesting a sacred space (Figure 88). This highlights that although some of these scenes may appear to be realistic portrayals of peasant life and provide a ‘snap-shot’ of rural existence; they are actually highly ambiguous and defy easy interpretation, similar to the depictions of cult and worship we examined in Chapter One. Priapus here reminds us once again that all landscape representation is constructed and saturated with idealism. In these images Priapus and his shrine seem to serve not only to suggest religious piety in the countryside, which we have explored in some detail in Chapter One, but often the shrine and herm are the only man-made feature in the landscape. In these cases, the presence of cult paraphernalia hints at the artistry of civilisation that is otherwise absent from the scene and serve to remind us that these formulaic pastoral scenes are decoration not reality.<sup>488</sup>

Many of the features of the pastoral landscape in these visual images are also key components in pastoral poetry. In both, the action takes place in an ambiguous landscape lacking a temporal dimension and, although with similarity to the Mediterranean landscape, often with non-descript geographical location too. In the literary and visual pastoral tradition, a sense of authenticity is shown through characters who act as shepherds and farmers, and simple activities such as singing competitions and days spent passing time in the landscape. However, the use of poetic conventions places these figures in a pleasant, dreamlike world where real and imaginary worlds blur together.

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<sup>488</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012: 145 argue that cult paraphernalia is used to evoke the idea of religious aura through a connection to Bacchus, it does not reflect actual cult activity.

As Segal put it: 'Ordinary life is touched with the luminous aura of myth.'<sup>489</sup> We very much see this in landscape images such as the Munich Glyptothek relief where actual activities from the country, like herding animals, are pulled into a mythological realm. In this imaginary world the simple shepherds speak in elegant words, which remind us that this is a fantasy where the sophisticated urban world is always just below the surface.<sup>490</sup>

Further, pastoral poetry suggests that often these idylls are not all that they seem and discord can occasionally surface, like the violence suggested in the story of Polyphemus and Galatea. Virgil, in particular, uses the *Eclogues* in the mid-first century BCE to disrupt the idealism of the pastoral by bringing it into conflict with the contemporary world. The very first eclogue introduces Rome as the power in control of the landscape; the shepherd Tityrus has to visit Rome for permissions and his friend Meliboeus is being forced off the land.<sup>491</sup> In *Eclogue 7* Priapus is evoked in a poetry competition. This may seem in keeping with the pastoral convention but it is a significantly disruptive move on the part of Virgil who has one shepherd embody the ideals of pastoral wholeheartedly in competition with one who lowers the tone when he chooses crude Priapus over graceful Diana and winter over spring.<sup>492</sup> With these poems in mind we can perhaps also see the pastoral world as one of potential conflict between the reality of the contemporary city and Priapus as a man-made yet rudimentary-looking god as a way of questioning the idyll.

This echoes the ambiguity of the image of Pan on the donkey. Pan is a known trouble maker and bringer of chaos and irrationality, and in this plaque he proudly comes into the pastoral landscape.<sup>493</sup> Perhaps, Priapus in many of these images is a reminder of the dangers of transgressing the boundaries into the pastoral world. Although, these sacral idyllic, pastoral landscapes may at first sight seem to be pattern book compositions of delightful spaces, the figure of Priapus reminds us that the simplicity is highly artificial and that these spaces are full of potential danger that must be kept within the boundaries of the framed landscape and the control of the Roman patron.

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<sup>489</sup> Segal 1981: 4-5.

<sup>490</sup> Breed 2006: 13; Dufallo 2013: 79.

<sup>491</sup> Virg. *Ecl.* 1.

<sup>492</sup> Virg. *Ecl.* 7.

<sup>493</sup> For a discussion of Roman approaches to irrationality see the essays in Hardie 2016; Gowers (133-154) and O'Rourke (199-220) in particular look at irrationality in the pastoral landscape.

## Luxury

We have seen, in Chapter Three, that luxury was inextricably bound up with domestic decoration in the Roman world and, inevitably, it has a part to play in the fantasy and escapism of landscape images too. In fact, luxury manifests itself in landscape images in several ways, whether because the landscape is a place of leisure and eroticism or because the landscape can be used to depict the goods made available by the empire, the composition of landscapes often suggests luxurious ways of life. At the same time, the objects and paintings themselves were expensive commodities associated with leisure contexts such as bathing and dining. We will explore physical spaces in more detail later in this chapter but as we look at the possible interpretations for images that seem to be set in a remote, rustic landscape we should not lose sight of the irony of the expense and cultural education required to create and own such a scene.

The representation of luxury in these landscapes is not straightforward; some landscapes, despite being luxuries themselves, seem actively to reject the comforts of urban and imperial cities. Once again, we see a tension between urban and rural worlds played out in these landscapes that bear little resemblance to the reality of either world. In such landscapes Priapus' image is at the heart of ambiguous scenes that use a variety of cultural references to negotiate boundaries between tradition, contemporary reality and fantasy.

## ***Eroticism***

Priapus' phallus clearly visually associates his image with eroticism and in Chapter Three we examined examples of this. The pastoral landscape is also strongly associated with erotic activity as the abundance leaves plenty of time for being swept up in love, lust and longing. As Newby has put it, the worlds of Bacchus and Venus are basically depicted as beautiful bodies in a landscape setting.<sup>494</sup> There is luxury at play here both in the opportunity for the viewer to see these bodies, which we explored in Chapter Three, and in the construction of a landscape that specifically creates space for erotic encounters. The most famous inhabitants of the pastoral realm are also some of the most famous lovers in mythology. In Adonis, we find a shepherd who becomes the lover of the goddess of love herself, Bacchus and Ariadne are depicted in languishing embraces and Daphnis, the mythological originator of the pastoral genre, takes various incarnations and inspires many

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<sup>494</sup> Newby 2016: 224.



**Figure 89:** Marble plaque with reclining couple. 1<sup>st</sup> century CE. St Petersburg, Hermitage Museums.  
Photo: Euan Martin.

shepherd-lover characters.<sup>495</sup> In elegy we see the poets retreat to the pastoral landscape to indulge, or lament, love affairs without the interruptions of civic life.<sup>496</sup> This is reflected visually in pastoral landscapes that feature erotic encounters.

Many images of pastoral eroticism depict content couples languishing in sensuous embrace and surrounded by comfort and abundance. We have seen that languorous poses are common in images of Bacchus and Ariadne, and Venus and Mars, for example the gem from Vienna in Chapter Three (Figure 67). A marble plaque in the Hermitage puts this firmly into a landscape context by showing a partially draped female figure, with a partially draped man reclining against her, in a richly depicted landscape (Figure 89). The couple sit on a rocky outcrop, and behind them a herm of Priapus stands on another rocky pile with a shepherd's crook and pan pipes behind him and a goose approaching him.<sup>497</sup> A variety of foliage adorns the background along with a pillar and urn. The combination of Priapus, the pillar and the goose are reminiscent of the sacral idyllic paintings and give a numinous quality to the scene, while Priapus in arrangement with the pipes and crook suggests a pastoral landscape reminiscent of pastoral literature. Both the male and female figure in this scene are damaged so it is difficult to ascribe specific characters or deities to them, however, the setting and

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<sup>495</sup> Hunter 2002: xvi calls the sufferings of Daphnis the 'founding myth of bucolic poetry'; Hardie 2016: 10 highlights that the disruptive power of love is a key theme in Virgil, Horace and the elegists.

<sup>496</sup> Hunt 2013: 145.

<sup>497</sup> The goose is also associated with Priapus in the *Satyricon* where Priapus' cult is offended by the killing of one of his geese.



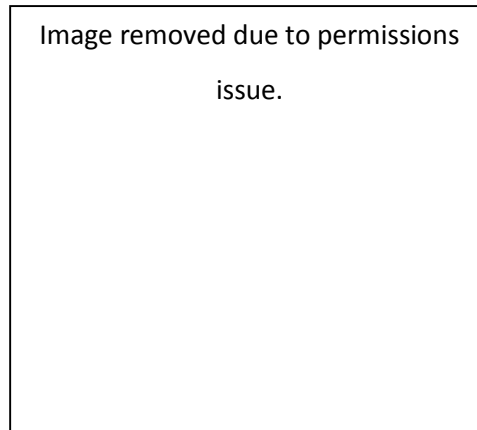
their rendering suggest that they could be one of many couples and this is testament to the pervasiveness of the *topoi* of landscape scenes.

Some explicit sexual images are set within a landscape. In a marble plaque in the Museum of Fine Arts, Boston we see Priapus overlooking a scene of Hercules and a female figure during intercourse, they are lying on Hercules's characteristic lion skin and his club rests against the column beneath a statue of Priapus (Figure 90). Priapus' presence clearly enhances the eroticism of this image, in fact he specifically points to his phallus, but he also sets the scene; it is clear that we are to understand this encounter as taking place in an outdoor setting from the trees, uneven ground and herm of Priapus. But Priapus' presence further suggests that this outdoor space is specifically a mythological pastoral environment, similar to sacral idyllic scenes. This is enhanced by the curtain draped between branches of a tree and an urn on a pillar in the background, features which are common to images of Priapus and that appear to represent cult activity, perhaps suggesting that here we are to see Hercules as involved in 'worshipping' Priapus by having sex in front of his statue and in his sacred space, in the same way that Quartilla in the *Satyricon* 'worships' Priapus through an orgy or the characters on the Bacchic sarcophagus (Figure 81) act out their sexual behaviour within similar cultic landscape.

Unfortunately, damage to the female figure makes it difficult to ascertain if this is supposed to represent Queen Omphale. The scene is in stark contrast to the painting in which we saw Priapus and Hercules paired so that the phallicism of Priapus appeared to mock the effeminated Hercules (Figure 52). In this case Priapus' herm seems overtly to assert the masculinity and sexual nature of the popular hero. If anything, Priapus is the less masculine in this image as his phallus is not as exaggerated as in many images and he is rendered impotent by his static nature unlike the active Hercules. There is undoubtedly a comical contrast between the pious setting and the explicit sex scene. The pastoral world was easily linked to sex through the associations with fertility and abundance and many Roman poets wittily played upon the potential for innuendo and metaphor. For example, Horace in an attempt to entice Tyndaris to his villa speaks graphically of overflowing cornucopia, almost mocking the sober piety of only a couple of lines earlier where he evokes the gods and the beauty of the pastoral landscape.<sup>498</sup> Tibullus also emphasises the country as a place of peace before graphically demonstrating the violence of love bound up with this idyll when he

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<sup>498</sup> Hor. *Carm.* 1.17.



**Figure 90:** Marble plaque with Hercules and Priapus. 1st Century CE. Boston, Museum and Fine Arts.

Photo: <http://www.mfa.org/collections/object/relief-with-herakles-and-omphale-or-a-nymph-151119> [accessed 15/04/18].

describes the ‘torn hair’, ‘smashed doors’ and ‘bruised cheeks’ after a quarrel with his mistress.<sup>499</sup>

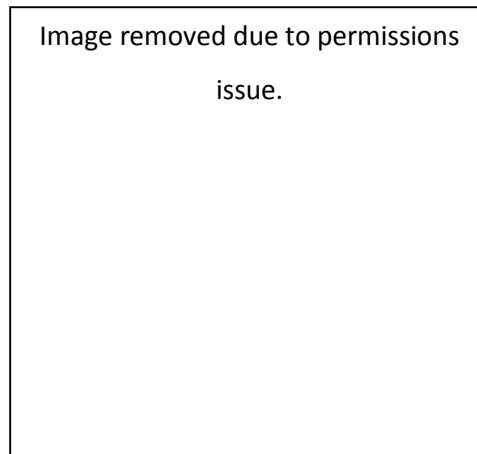
This violence is reminiscent of the story of Polyphemus where we have seen both Odysseus and Acis are attacked. The scene on the plaque also clearly links Priapus and the landscapes with the voyeurism we explored in Chapter Three; in this case, Priapus is not only watching but also encouraging the viewer to join him. The framing of landscape images creates a window into a world that should be private and in this case the curtain behind the couple emphasises that they are not expecting to be seen, however, they are clearly composed for the enjoyment of an audience.

In Chapter Three we saw that images of Polyphemus and Galatea could be associated with sensuality as images with highly charged erotic potential but also with a strong sense of longing and unrequited love (Figure 64). This is a prominent theme in pastoral landscapes; we have already noted that in the painting from the House of the Priest Amandus the distance between them is shown as a gulf between land and sea.<sup>500</sup> This pastoral longing comes to one of its most exaggerated forms in Roman romance novels, for example *Daphnis and Chloe* written by Longus in the second century CE, which put the couple through a series of dramatic perils and obstacles before they can consummate their relationship. The world of this extravagant romance is clearly the pastoral world of the earlier first century poets. In Chapter Three, we discussed Tibullus evoking Priapus to seduce a young boy, it is also notable that he sets this poem within the pastoral landscape. As well as the sexual element of

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<sup>499</sup> Tib. 1.10.

<sup>500</sup> Veyne 1988: 101 shows that elegists inhabit a fictional world that allows them to sing of and suffer from love.



**Figure 91:** Fresco of Polyphemus and Galatea from the House of the Coloured Capitals at Pompeii (VII.4.31). Naples, Archaeology Museum.

Photo: De Caro 2012: 20.

Priapus, he emphasises the rustic nature of his image before receiving advice from the statue. The poem is heavy with references to a landscape and deities familiar from the images we have discussed, for example Muses, Venus and Bacchus are all referenced among ripening grapes and yokes used as metaphors for breaking the boy down, Tibullus also references 'hard labours' and 'wearing out unused hands with work' which play upon the stark differences between the life of the poet in the pastoral world and that of those who genuinely labour in the countryside. Priapus can serve as a reminder of the potential for consummation but also for the frustrations of lovers. In particular, the obvious phallicism of Priapus in landscape images reminds us that Venus must triumph and to deny the sexual freedom of the pastoral world leads to suffering.<sup>501</sup>

Priapus is a significant figure in the world of Theocretan pastoral, which is the basis for the pastoral world of Roman poets and landscape painters.<sup>502</sup> In Theocritus' *Idyll* 1 many of the tropes of the genre are introduced and Priapus is centre stage. The poem is set around a shepherd and a goatherd whiling away the afternoon with song, in a pastoral setting with an 'image' of Priapus by which they sit.<sup>503</sup> In the song, Priapus, along with Aphrodite and Hermes, offers advice to Daphnis who is dying due to a vow not to love another.<sup>504</sup> Images of Polyphemus and Galatea, therefore, show the abundance and piety of the pastoral but also the potential suffering and violence which seem at

<sup>501</sup> Hubbard 1998.

<sup>502</sup> For more detail on the influence of Theocritus in Roman pastoral see Segal 1981 and Hubbard 1998.

<sup>503</sup> Theoc. *Id.* 1.21.

<sup>504</sup> I use the Greek variants of the gods here for consistency with Theocritus.



**Figure 92:** Terracotta plaque with Nile scene.  
Copenhagen, NY Carlsberg Glyptothek.  
Photo: Euan Martin.

odds with this idyllic space but are always present. One eroticised image of the couple shows Polyphemus as successful in his seduction and the two embrace in the nude, with Galatea's garment suggestively around her lower legs (Figure 91).

In these erotic landscapes, the idealism of the idyll is brought into question by the presence of Priapus, who subverts the idyll with comic sexual excess and violence. The luxury of sex in this world is not simple and those who are not swept up suffer consequences. This is a world where inhabitants must lose control. The ambiguity of Priapus as a highly sexual object who is unable to act is emblematic of this situation and of the need for control in the 'real' world.

### ***Exoticism***

Eroticism and exoticism were often closely intertwined aspects of luxury culture, as we have seen with the idolisation of foreign young boys or the association of imported goods with seduction in Chapter Three. In landscape, this particularly extended to the treatment of Egypt in imagery which could be full of erotic elements, both of a sensuous or voyeuristic nature and comical elements, such as phallic pygmies. In the lush landscapes of the Nile we can see a sense of luxury with connotations familiar from Mediterranean landscapes such as abundance and leisure but with the added sense of exoticism and imperial conquest.<sup>505</sup> In these images Priapus plays a part in making foreign elements seem familiar, setting the scene as a fantasy and reminding viewers of the Roman masculine

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<sup>505</sup> Bergmann 2001: 154 notes that from the second century BCE a variety of new landscapes came into Italy as loot and were paraded in front of the public in triumphs and displayed in prominent places before being incorporated into private spaces, she is specifically referencing Greek landscapes but this is also true of other parts of the empire.



**Figure 93:** Fresco of a sacral-Idyllic landscape from the Temple of Isis, Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: WolfgangRieger [Public domain], via Wikimedia Commons [accessed 19/04/18].

conquest, and control, of these landscapes. The ambiguity of Priapus' image allows him to do all of these things and not seem out of place in these scenes.

'Nile' scenes often feature exotic animals, pygmies and cult of Isis paraphernalia, but it is not uncommon for Egyptianising motifs to be found in a wide variety of other landscapes, adding a sense of the exotic and of cultic ritual.<sup>506</sup> In a Campana relief from the first century BCE viewers are provided with a 'window' onto the Nile through a series of archways. Animals, including several crocodiles, a river with a boat of grotesque pygmies and a series of crude wooden huts make a rich visual scene (Figure 92). Leaning out of one of the huts is a disproportionately large, partially-draped woman looking at an ithyphallic statue of Priapus which faces the other direction. Taken together the composition of this scene is clearly intended to show the viewer an exotic, and erotic, landscape that is distinct from Italian landscapes, yet there is a familiarity in the visual elements and composition that makes it easy to read and understand. Priapus helps to signal this is a different world but one that plays by the same rules as the other mythological landscapes.

Landscapes were not only popular in the domestic sphere, a sacral idyllic scene from the Temple of Isis at Pompeii follows the conventions of many other Roman sacral-Idyllic scenes (Figure 93). It is possible that the herm represents an Egyptian deity, however, given the way in which the composition conforms to the motifs of other Greco-Roman style paintings it is notable that an ithyphallic herm is present as part of a typical sacred landscape. Like the painting from Boscotrecase,

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<sup>506</sup> Verslyus 2002 makes clear we do not need to associate Isis cult paraphernalia with actual ritual practice in a space or house. Platt 2002, for example, argues that the Isis decoration in House II.2.2-5 at Pompeii shows that religious practice would have taken place there.

here we see a large old sacred tree in an architectural precinct set into a rocky landscape. A fisherman provides the image of local peasantry and an offering is being made to the deity. Also significant here is the way the herm lies at an angle as if it has fallen, perhaps suggesting that this landscape, Priapus, and the herm are of great antiquity and largely left undisturbed for generations. This scene also combines Egyptian, Hellenistic and Roman motifs, the fact that landscape provides distance allows for multiple references to appear side by side and contribute to a discourse about Roman culture and influences. Speaking of a landscape fresco in the Villa Farnesina which also combines Hellenising and Egyptianising motifs, Diana Spencer has attributed this to the culture of collecting that was a significant feature of the empire and the cosmopolitanism that came with it.<sup>507</sup> She goes on to say:

Key compositional elements (the Isis-shrine, the water carrier, the dancers) hint at the increasingly cosmopolitan nature of Rome as capital, while alluding to the need somehow to integrate them with the rustic-idyllic qualities of Rome's mythic pastoral origins – cued up in part by the gnarled tree and Priapus.<sup>508</sup>

Here we can see landscape scenes being used in the discourses surrounding exoticism, luxury and imperialism. Priapus works as a marker of pastoral tradition but specifically Roman pastoral tradition, albeit a tradition heavily reliant on Hellenistic or Alexandrian models, so he asserts the dominance of Rome in such landscapes. The relief from Copenhagen also emphasises the way in which Egyptianising scenes could reflect Roman pastoral images. Although this scene is more clearly set in the Nile region, it carries similar compositional elements to a typical 'Roman' landscape including fishing on the water, dwellings, locals going about banal tasks and even a herm of Priapus. The way the phallic Priapus is associated with the nude female enhances the eroticism and luxury of the scene, the depiction of the woman with her back to the viewer and Priapus nearby certainly seems to encourage voyeurism, whilst his strong association with traditional pastoral signals that it is a landscape very much part of the Roman fantasy realm with all the rusticity and piety that entails. Thus, he brings together two ideologies that may seem to be at odds with one another but can co-exist in this liminal world.

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<sup>507</sup> Spencer 2010: 152. The culture of collecting was very important in Rome during the later republic and early empire and is very much associated with conquest and ownership of culture, see Rutledge 2012 for discussion of collections in the civic space.

<sup>508</sup> Spencer 2010: 152.

In the House of the Ceii in Pompeii (I.6.15), the exoticism of Egyptianising decoration is extensive and the garden area is decorated with large paintings each showing different aspects of an imagined Egyptian landscape (Figure 94). One wall has a landscape of animals reminiscent of a *paradesoi*, another has a comical landscape of pygmies playing in boats and chasing animals such as hippopotamuses, and a third has a landscape with many of the features of the sacral idyllic genre, including a herm of Priapus. It has been suggested that these three walls represent the three geographic areas of upper, middle and lower Egypt.<sup>509</sup> This shows that even landscapes that closely align themselves with particular geographies still use the convention of the herm of Priapus to add a sacred character to a landscape. He is a herm on top of a rocky column in a landscape made up of familiar sacral-idyllic elements such as small temples, wandering human figures and gnarled trees. There is little difference here between this and other sacral-idyllic scenes that are ambiguous in time and place, however the context and the distinctive Egyptian style ship in the background suggest it should be associated with Egypt.<sup>510</sup> This scene is framed by a painted border of leaves with a wall below decorated with other plants; it seems as if this and the other scenes in the room are windows into another landscape. Framing images like this, and like the Campana plaque, suggests that they are objects to be admired, wondered at and governed by a superior culture. Priapus in such images seems to represent the Roman male 'overseer' keeping a check on these unruly 'foreign' elements and justifying Roman control.<sup>511</sup> We will return to this notion of framing and controlling 'other' landscapes later in this chapter.

Roman landscape scenes can synthesise a range of models from different cultural contexts because they have taken on a very broad visual language that might be considered Hellenistic in origin but is actually distinctively Roman in the way that it assimilates motifs from different parts of the empire to construct universal worlds of luxury and fantasy. As a deity who is simultaneously Roman and foreign we can see that Priapus has a natural place in such images both highlighting the tension for the viewer and also suggesting through art that Egypt is now a sphere of Roman control. Egyptian motifs and Nilotic landscapes became popular from the late first century BCE in domestic decoration which corresponds to the conquest of Egypt and suggests that the incorporation of Egyptian scenes

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<sup>509</sup> Mazzoleni and Pappalardo 2004: 385.

<sup>510</sup> Ling 1991: 149 points out that the rocks in this scene are not necessarily Egyptian, so the scene blends different geographies but the ship seems to be key to lending an air of exoticism.

<sup>511</sup> Hingley 2010: 56. Versluys 2002: 436 also suggests that the inclusion of pygmies is used to suggest that the foreign inhabitants are badly behaved and need to be conquered. There are possible parallels here with the ways in which Greeks were characterised as soft and effeminate to justify conquest there.



**Figure 94:** Fresco on the east wall of room 9, House of the Ceii, Pompeii (1.6.15).  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 19/04/18].

is more about harmony from the perspective of the Roman Empire, by subsuming their landscape into a generic Roman one the conquerors exert dominance.<sup>512</sup> They also further assimilate Hellenistic motifs into Roman visual culture as Egyptian motifs were popular after Alexander's success in the region. Priapus is clearly a typical feature of all of these landscapes, which suggests they are conceived as being part of the same world, the all-powerful Roman world, symbolised by a traditional, male, phallic symbol in the herm of Priapus.

These various landscapes show that a mix of references could be combined to create an idealised world, these references could be Roman, Egyptian or Hellenistic in origin or style but they all equally belong into this world which represents Roman cultural concerns. All of these typical motifs evoke a space in which piety, leisure and fertility are priorities, and reflect the very real contemporary culture. Priapus' presence as one of these motifs in both the literature and visual imagery helps to remind us that ambiguity and mixed origins are part and parcel of this world and that ultimately all motifs can be brought under man's control or specifically under Roman influence within a confined space. It is no coincidence that the popularity of landscape as domestic decoration coincided with increased confidence in the empire, economy and technology; the Roman citizen was visually controlling a view of the world (albeit a fantasy composed of a wide variety of symbols) within their house.<sup>513</sup>

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<sup>512</sup> Winsor Leach 2004: 140; Verslyus 2002: 436.

<sup>513</sup> Wallace-Hadrill 2008; Merrills 2017.



The abundance depicted in these Egyptianising landscapes is analogous to Bacchic landscapes.<sup>514</sup> The realm of Bacchus is one where wildness meets civilisation and loss of order is always a risk. We can see that in this imagery of a disorderly mythological world the process of framing it in a landscape helps to impose a boundary to the potential danger and the presence of Priapus simultaneously hints at an age-old past whilst reminding us of the civilising influence of man. Similar ideas were very influential in Roman attempts to recreate a variety of landscapes in their own private gardens and estates.

### **Ambiguous Frames**

We have seen that a variety of landscape images were popular in Roman domestic contexts and that Priapus was a consistent element in images of sacred spaces, pastoral spaces and spaces where luxury could be indulged. We will now turn our attention to landscapes in relation to 'real' world activity and space. We will particularly explore the ways in which landscapes can produce highly ambiguous contexts in which notions of reality, artificiality and fantasy are played with in carefully defined spaces created by framing the landscape. Both real and imagined landscapes are highly artificial as are the borders that seek to define and control them. As a liminal figure, Priapus both reinforces and challenges boundaries but he is just as constructed as the borders he transgresses. We will see that in the Roman domestic sphere there was a persistent blurring of boundaries between artificial and natural, public and private, and fantasy and reality. Domestic spaces were key sites for demonstrating *paideia*, and cultural, social and economic status. In gardens the ambiguity created a multifunctional space that was simultaneously distant from the real world and grounded in the contemporary need to perform elite identity by demonstrating the cultural taste, wealth and status necessary to maintain it in the real world. Priapus is a guide for the viewer in these contexts and reinforces the civilising influence of man, or more specifically the elite Roman man. We will explore landscapes in the second half of this chapter as a framing device for images of Priapus as part of a bordered, controlled landscape convention in which ideas about identity, culture and society could be explored.

Just as painted images are set within a frame in Roman wall decoration, 'real' domestic spaces use art and architecture to frame the imagery and activity within them. A frame distinguishes the landscape creating a structure to project our cultural discourses into the image, but at the same time it also emphasises that the scene is a construction and reminds us of the ambiguity between viewing

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<sup>514</sup> Wyler 2006: 228.



**Figure 95:** Detail of the Polyphemus Fresco from House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).  
Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
www.pompeiiinpictures.com [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 96:** Detail from a wall painting at the House of the Priest Amandus in Pompeii (I.7.7).  
Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
www.pompeiiinpictures.com [accessed 15/04/18].

fantasy and reality.<sup>515</sup> As Marin emphasises, frames often delegate to a figure within the scene the responsibility of instructing the viewer in how to employ the gaze and what context to use as a frame for understanding the scene.<sup>516</sup> These figures are often part of the composition of the scene but they are also marginalised and share some affinity with both the frame and viewer. We see this, for example, in the reclining couple and Hercules plaques (Figures 89 and 90) which feature Priapus almost as an audience at the margins of the scene and overlooking the action. In many respects, Priapus plays this part in Roman landscapes; his statue gives us a visual clue as to the location, temporality and ambiguities of the scene, and reminds the viewer they are looking at artifice; at a man-made representation charged with contemporary cultural relevance because he is also a man-made object. Priapus' presence in the landscape is imbued with connotations of not only spectatorship but also of performance. As we shall see, this could be literal performances of theatre or the performance of the Roman masculine identity as dominant in all aspects of life and culture. Priapus reminds us that all performances, like landscapes and mythology, contain contradictions and grey areas, for example; reality and illusion, culture and bawdiness, spectator and performer. Frames are one way of delineating and controlling these ambiguous spaces. They can establish a landscape for spectating, transgressing, luxuriating and performing whilst maintaining a distance.<sup>517</sup>

Often, frames are a way of imposing boundaries and a sense of order; this is particularly relevant when exploring Roman landscapes. The Romans were often ambivalent towards the natural world because as well as being beautiful it was considered a potentially dangerous and chaotic place. Wildness is brought firmly into the control of the viewer when the natural world is turned into a

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<sup>515</sup> There are many ways to give shape and definition to a frame; this chapter will take as its starting point Duro's 1996a interpretation of the frame, which defines it as articulating distinction. Duro further comments that its relationship to the work (or in this case landscape) may never be fixed but that the unity of the work and the frame provide a lens through which 'our notions of reality and truth, our expectations and desires are given (illusory) coherence.'

<sup>516</sup> Marin 1996: 82.

<sup>517</sup> Milani 2009: xi emphasises the importance of distance in human interactions with the landscape.

bordered landscape and is framed in a domestic setting. Priapus embodies ancient landscapes whilst also making them controllable, he is ancient, acts in extreme ways and is part of the world of Bacchus but he is also man-made. He becomes a deity of man's world rather than wildness and makes landscapes safe and civilised whilst reminding us of the inherent ambiguities and dangers in such spaces. This is apparent in the violence and threats of Priapus in his protection of literary gardens. Whether taming the danger of the wild in mythological landscapes or observing erotic and exotic panoramas, a cultural mind-set of order and domination pervaded the Roman relationship to landscapes. Priapus brings the natural world of the gods closer to the orderliness of the world of man. Perhaps this was especially pertinent at a time when political and social change lead to feelings of disenfranchisement and loss of dominance amongst the elite.

Conversely, frames, like Priapus, are not only a tool for restraint they are also ambiguous; they may appear to provide a hard and substantial border but this is itself artifice imposed on a landscape.<sup>518</sup> Often the decorative frames in Roman homes remind us of the Bacchic world they contain within; vines, theatrical masks and *thiasos* figures, such as maenads or erotes, are abundant in frames, gardens and wall decoration as well as in the landscape scenes themselves. In the House of the Priest Amandus the pastoral landscapes are surrounded by unrealistically slender columns with vines and gold decorations (Figure 95).<sup>519</sup> This raises questions over whether the frames control the image or are part of that fantasy. For example, the wall decoration in the House of the Priest Amandus has women and erotes who appear to be floating on the walls and masks in amongst the borders, it is as if the pastoral world of the panel paintings has escaped the frame onto the walls (Figure 96). We know that in other contexts Priapus' image breaks down boundaries; therefore, he is often an aid to dissolving the frame of painted landscapes to allow the viewer to interact with (or even dominate) that world. Priapus certainly helps to set the scene for these confused landscapes because he represents Bacchic chaos and luxury, pastoral and mythological other worldliness, and natural fertility. However, he subversively imposes familiarity, civilisation and the order of the world of men into a scene at the same time.

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<sup>518</sup> For example, Bennett 1996: 242 suggests that frames can also be unstable and specifically highlights pornography as one way of breaking boundary of the frame.

<sup>519</sup> Vit. *De arch.* 7.5.4 complains about the unrealistic frames and structures used to decorate contemporary walls.

Zahra Newby has described the Roman Villa as ‘a place of imagination’ where Roman enjoyed blurring the boundary between reality and mythological realms.<sup>520</sup> We will now see how in ‘real life’ the imaginary worlds of the villa were replicated, constructed and framed, both in painted landscapes and architectural design. Framing was a significant device for providing a designated space within domestic contexts, particularly for potentially transgressive experiences such as dining and leisure in the garden, but the boundaries, even in ‘real’ life were always permeable and potentially dangerous. In this context, Priapus reinforces the borders, both by making the borders ambiguous enough for interaction and by protecting the viewer from the world within the frame. We will look at gardens as spaces where nature and artifice were always in tension; villas as spaces where frames offered cultural context to experiences; and performance spaces as liminal worlds that become intertwined with the domestic space. Priapus shows us that in the domestic sphere the concept of reality was fluid and that imagery and performance could allow disparate worlds to mingle with one another.

### Gardens and Landscape

Many Romans attempted to create garden spaces similar to those from landscape painting, in which they could perform being part of another world and indulge in leisure pursuits. There is a strong tension between artifice and reality because gardens are a highly constructed form of nature, and the mythological world they seek to recreate is also a sophisticated cultural artifice. This sense of ambiguity was even further compounded by that fact that Roman society was highly competitive and driven to increasingly extreme interventions in the natural world. They sought to recreate a sophisticated, culturally manufactured mythological realm of literature and art in their own private sphere. Despite, the fact that gardens were ostensibly recreational, the elite male was always on show and so Roman gardens acted as places of socio-political display.<sup>521</sup> We have touched upon gardens as settings for images of Priapus and places of luxury in previous chapters; here we will revisit the garden as a form of landscape that is, in many ways, like a painted image; an artificial representation and framing of the natural world. This helps us to understand how Priapus’ image could visually represent the liminal nature of gardens, which exist between reality and a Bacchic pastoral world.

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<sup>520</sup> Newby 2012: 350.

<sup>521</sup> von Stackelberg 2009: 11.

Image removed due to permissions issue.

**Figure 97:** Marble decorative panel from the House of the Coloured Capitals at Pompeii (VII.4.31). 1st century BCE – 1st century CE. Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.  
Photo: Mattusch 2008: 14.

We have seen in Chapter Two that Priapus was an active apotropaic figure in liminal domestic spaces. We should, therefore, also imagine that he was a significant part of artificial landscapes as he could protect the inhabitants and guests from the inherent dangers of being swept up by the potential disorder, luxury and romance of another world. This danger could come in many forms; one may get swept up in the eroticism seen on the plaque showing Hercules and Omphale (Figure 90), encounter a dangerous deity like the Pan on the plaque from Naples (Figure 88) or end up in the ecstasy and abandon shown by the maenads on a panel from the House of the Coloured Capitals as they worship Priapus (Figure 97). As explained in Chapters Two and Three, excess was always a significant risk that could cause laughter, and social and political censure for the elite male and the pastoral world of Priapus contained many temptations and risks. The ‘real’ wild was just as dangerous as the one constructed in Roman homes; a mysterious realm of the gods it was viewed with awe and misgiving. As an apotropaic figure Priapus’ image could offer some protection in these spaces that tried to introduce the ‘wild’ into the domestic.

In many ways a Roman garden was a living landscape painting; it artificially encapsulated and recreated the fictional pastoral world that we have explored in the first half of this chapter, including Bacchic and exotic elements. An ideal garden could contain a variety of landscapes that reflected those from art and literature. For example, an extravagant villa estate may contain grottoes, woods and meadows, as well as formalised gardens with ordered plantings, walks, fountains and porticoes.<sup>522</sup> It could also include decorative elements from the Bacchic world, Egyptianising decoration and motifs from Hellenistic idylls. Different areas of an estate would be manipulated to look either ‘natural’ or ordered but both were artificially created by landscapers through the use of

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<sup>522</sup> Kuttner 1999b: 9.



**Figure 98:** South view of the peristyle of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii (VI.15.1).

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 19/04/18].

plantings, architecture and sculpture. Raised terraces could be employed to ensure the best views from windows and seating areas, in fact, the availability of a wide variety of views was a mark of luxury.<sup>523</sup> For example, in the Villa of Agrippa Postumus the room with the painting of Polyphemus, Galatea and Priapus opened onto a portico constructed to make the most of a sea view and so the view and the decoration echo each other.

### ***Urban Gardens: The House of the Vettii***

We see idealised, pastoral landscapes at play in properties of a wide variety of sizes and in urban environments as well as luxury villa estates; on the smallest scale a canal and fountain amongst columns in a garden went some way towards creating a man-made version of nature. For example, the small water channel in the House of the Ceii that collected rain water from nearby roofs greatly enhanced the Nilotic decoration in the garden.<sup>524</sup> The urban House of the Vettii in Pompeii, explored in more detail in Chapter Two, had a large peristyle garden conceived with pastoral landscapes in mind; it is the realm of Bacchus, Priapus and Venus. Notions of fertility, love and revelry are represented in the plantings, water features and decoration. The effect would have been deeply synaesthetic; pictures and statues provided opportunities for contemplation, plantings provided

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<sup>523</sup> Purcell 1984: 202.

<sup>524</sup> Merrills 2017: 119.



**Figure 99:** Marble Bacchus in the peristyle of the House of the Vettii, Pompeii (VI.15.1).  
Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 19/04/18].

shade and fragrance, as well as visual beauty, and water was in abundance to provide soothing trickling sounds.<sup>525</sup>

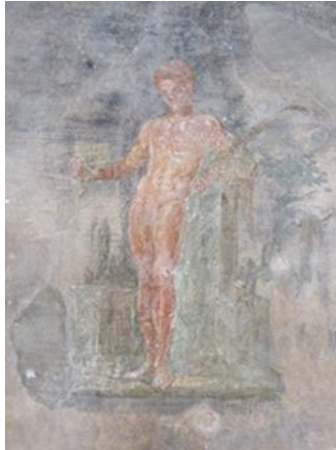
The plantings and water display were complemented by statues of Bacchus and his companions. As well as the statue of Priapus which we have discussed in earlier chapters, the garden contained double herms of Bacchus, Ariadne, Silenus and a maenad, a statue of a young Bacchus, several statues of satyrs, and several boys/erotes (Figure 99). The colonnaded peristyle was decorated with painted framed images which give it the appearance of a picture gallery for guests to stroll through. Figure 98 shows how the use of painted panels and columns contributed to this gallery appearance and created a series of frames.<sup>526</sup> The paintings here also contribute to the Bacchic theme and include a satyr with pan pipes, a maenad and images of food, which may have served as a reminder of the bounty of the natural world and the hospitality of the owner (Figure 100).<sup>527</sup> Altogether, the garden immerses the visitor in a tranquil landscape that seems far removed from the urban world that encloses it. In this space, Priapus is a reminder of the fertility of the mythological pastoral realm he so often represents in imagery. For example, water is very important in the pastoral landscapes

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<sup>525</sup> According to Jashemski 1993: 153-54; 'Water from 12 fountain statuettes (2 bronze and 10 marble) on bases placed between the columns of the portico, jetted into 8 marble basins which stood in the water channel at the edge of the garden.'

<sup>526</sup> Newby 2026: 141 explains that a number of decorative ensembles seem to deliberately allude to picture gallery displays.

<sup>527</sup> Zarmakoupi 2014: 125.



**Figure 100:** Fresco of a satyr from the peristyle at the House of the Vettii, Pompeii (VI.15.1).  
Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
[www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 19-04-18].

we examined earlier since it is necessary for life, and we have seen that Priapus may have sprinkled his phallus with water in some depictions (Figure 9). In the House of the Vettii the water comes from Priapus' phallus-like semen giving life.

As a familiar companion to images of the Bacchic retinue, Priapus also calls to mind the hedonism, danger and drunken unruliness associated with that realm, as we have seen in the vase at the Hermitage (Figure 56), and the painting of the death of Pentheus in a room adjoining the Vettii peristyle is a stark reminder of the danger inherent in proximity to the gods, especially the disorder of Bacchus. Gardens remind us that although the world of the gods was dangerous, it also brought rewards and surrendering to Bacchus could lead to vegetal abundance and beautiful, fertile landscapes, even the myth of Pentheus suggests rewards are there for those who follow rather than reject Bacchus.<sup>528</sup> However, this world is also carefully constructed and one can never lose sight of that fact. The garden may evoke a natural, even wild landscape, but it does so through careful management of water, as the Priapus fountain statue makes clear, the framing of images and carefully selected statues and plantings. This garden brings order to the chaos of nature and sits precariously on the boundary between reality and artificiality, the safety of the urban domestic world and the danger of the realm of the gods. Even though this boundary is dangerous, we know that Priapus functioned as an apotropaion, so he could be part of both worlds; he could protect whilst allowing access to all of the good things in the Bacchic landscape. This is encapsulated in the

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<sup>528</sup> Rosivach 2012: 10.



Priapus painted onto the pillar in House II.9.1 that borders the peristyle garden, he protects from the dangers of the garden and his companion on the other side of the pillar, Bacchus, whilst offering the abundant fruits in his cloak (Figure 3).

Nature and artifice co-existed in the garden. As Spencer has said, part of the enjoyment for elites in villa gardens must have been in being able to recognise the artificiality of the landscape and scrutinising the blurred boundaries between art and nature in the scenes provided by the owner.<sup>529</sup> Natural features such as grottoes could be decorated with sculpture to resemble theatres or picture galleries and trees could be shaped to look like columns, marble columns could be covered in vines or ivy to look like plants.<sup>530</sup> Cicero even praises a garden with so much ivy the statues appeared to be engaged in gardening.<sup>531</sup> Roman art and literature plays upon these tensions, for example, in *Priapea* 42 Priapus is offered apples but they are made of wax, in stark contrast to the abundant grapes in the nearby vineyard.<sup>532</sup> Although this is ostensibly humorous it also suggests artificiality has crept into the traditions and piety of the pastoral world.<sup>533</sup>

Bettina Bergmann has suggested that, as Roman concepts, art and nature were not opposites but related and on a scale: the important thing was to use human abilities to enhance nature and create harmony. This may be a reason for the significance of Priapus in landscapes as we have seen elsewhere that he is an important feature in liminal spaces where apparently conflicting worlds merge. In the House of the Vettii, the space was filled with suggestions of Bacchus' liminal world whilst being contained in a conventional peristyle frame, which in turn is an architectural feature borrowed from the east. Additionally, in the House of the Vettii framing is used specifically to emphasise the image of Priapus. Clark suggests that it is possible that the alignment of the Priapus at the fountain lined up with the doorway, which was also decorated with a Priapus creating a 'Priapus axis'.<sup>534</sup> Figure 101 shows the doorway Priapus with the view through to the peristyle; the combination of these two Priapus images visualises the apotropaic and hedonistic aspects of the deity in one view. Although these frames suggest control there is also something subversive about them. The frames contain the fantasy and danger but they still allow the viewer access to this

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<sup>529</sup> Spencer 2010: 167.

<sup>530</sup> For example, the displays at Sperlonga or the use of the garden for theatrical displays of Orpheus as discussed in Chapter Three. See also Hartswick 2004: 12-13.

<sup>531</sup> Cicero. *QFr.* 3.1.5.

<sup>532</sup> *Priap.* 42.

<sup>533</sup> Uden 2010: 215.

<sup>534</sup> Clark 1998: 174-177; Frederick 1995: 283.



**Figure 101:** View from doorway of the House of Vettii at Pompeii (VI.15.1) which lines up with the peristyle.

Photo:

[https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus\\_Fresco.jpg](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Priapus_Fresco.jpg)  
[accessed 15/04/18].

pastoral world, albeit temporarily, and although they suggest Roman dominance through control, they use eastern imports to frame an unconventional Priapus fountain

### ***Hellenism and Peristyles***

In homes of all sizes the Romans used architecture to frame the most significant views or to create the ambience of a Hellenistic pleasure garden. The idea of the *locus amoenus*, meaning a delightful place, brings Hellenistic literary and philosophical traditions into the landscape of the Roman garden. It designated a space of relaxation and sensory gratification in which ideas of rusticity were central but it was also a sophisticated space to be inspired by muses and surrender to deep thought, like the pastoral poets in their Hellenised landscapes.<sup>535</sup> In art and literature, the use of rustic motifs taken from Hellenistic pastoral poetry was a sophisticated game that constructed an imaginary world and alluded to the past and present simultaneously.<sup>536</sup> This is also true in many respects of the physical spaces within Roman houses and villas but particularly the peristyle and portico; as we have seen in Chapter One, these were Hellenistic-inspired spaces adapted from *gymnasia*.<sup>537</sup> Peristyles could also be used to expand the garden into a full pleasure park through the painting of walls to suggest an

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<sup>535</sup> Owen Lee 1970: 260.

<sup>536</sup> Spencer 2010: 11. See Hinds 1998 for discussion of allusion in Roman literature.

<sup>537</sup> Dickmann 1997: 124. Also note, Zarmakoupi 2014 argues, it is not important to what extent the peristyle or portico resembled the Greek original, more significant is the fact that the Romans wanted to use something of Greek origin.



**Figure 102:** Fresco from the Temple of Isis at Pompeii.  
 Naples, National Museum of Archaeology.  
 Photo: Miguel Hermoso Cuesta - Own work, CC BY-SA 4.0,  
<https://commons.wikimedia.org/w/index.php?curid=37429203>  
 [accessed 15/04/18]

expanse of the garden into further plantings, or parks with exotic animals being hunted or fighting each other.<sup>538</sup>

A landscape painting from the Temple of Isis at Pompeii shows us how a peristyle may have been conceptualised in its ideal form (Figure 102). Figures stroll around a colonnade with a pool in the centre surrounded by large trees and blue skies, a Priapus herm is sketched in the bottom right corner of the image. Priapus' presence here suggests this is an idealised, hybrid scene, one in which Hellenistic sophistication is combined with traditional piety and contemporary ideals which makes the viewer question whether this landscape is sophisticated, crude or simultaneously both. Peristyles were important Hellenising features in gardens of all sizes and locations. They could be used to evoke worlds of leisure and philosophy, where strolling and debating in a garden was a sophisticated way to pass the time.<sup>539</sup> The fact one was supposed to walk in these spaces is significant for the way in which viewers engaged with images in peristyles.

Walking was considered key to intellectual development through debate and contemplation, and many peristyles, like the House of the Vettii, had a sequence of individually framed images that

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<sup>538</sup> As we have seen in Chapter Three collecting exotic ephemera was an important aspect of luxury and connoisseurship in the Roman world. In a landscape context this could be done by importing exotic plants or setting up galleries of imported Greek artworks, but it could also be achieved in painting gardens and landscapes or animals. Much of the enjoyment in these images may have rested on being able to identify different species and their origins. Kuttner 1999b: 11; also see Ling 1991 or Bergmann 2008 for detailed discussion of garden paintings.

<sup>539</sup> Purcell 1987: 187 suggests that contemplating man's relationship to nature would be an appropriate philosophical question in such spaces. Bergmann 2001: 155 calls these spaces *Bildungslandschaft*, cultural or educative landscapes, because of the intellectual as well as physical involvement with the space.



**Figure 103:** Painting 6 from the peristyle of the House of the Gladiators at Pompeii (V.5.3).  
Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

encouraged the guest both to stop temporarily to take in the details of one image and to keep moving to the next frame. Looking at and describing art was considered a highly sophisticated skill in Roman culture, so this activity was a key part of displaying *paideia* and taste.<sup>540</sup> Priapus' association with the incorporation of eastern motifs into Roman culture suggests that, although walking in peristyles was framed as a Hellenic experience or activity it was used as a tool for understanding the nature of Roman elite cultural identity.<sup>541</sup> Mantha Zarmakoupi argues that the peristyle both allowed for the incorporation of Greek culture within the domestic sphere and tamed any corrupting influence.<sup>542</sup> This approach suggests that framing eastern culture provided a mechanism for controlling it, like the landscape images. Ironically, Priapus is unable to walk in most of these images as he is a herm; even in spaces designed to encourage movement he remains distinctly static and unable to take part in the sophistication. A notable exception to this is the House of the Vettii where he is depicted as an active character and may even be dancing in the fountain sculpture, like the luxury items we examined in Chapter Three. There, we suggested that the luxury setting liberated Priapus to become more life-like, that in such fantasy settings as gardens it might be possible for Priapus to be freed from his bonds and have more agency.

The garden of the House of the Gladiators at Pompeii (V.5.3) had a large peristyle in the centre of the house with paintings around it. Many of these were destroyed in the bombings of the 1940s but

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<sup>540</sup> See Laird 1996 for discussion of *ekphrasis*.

<sup>541</sup> von Stackelberg 2009: 21 explores the encouragement to move in a circulatory way around gardens associated with peristyles.

<sup>542</sup> Zarmakuopi 2014: 103.

the remaining panel scenes show the west wall was decorated with elaborate hunting scenes with a variety of animals, including deer, lions, boar and bears being attacked by dogs. Painting 6 is unusual as it provides a conventional sacral-idyllic landscape background to an image of a bear eating fruit from a tree while a deer is attacked on the left of the scene (Figure 103). Behind the bear is a round temple-like structure, a bridge and a herm of Priapus on a column. This suggests that these paintings were a window onto another world, providing a context for the animals in a luxurious, distant world. The effect of viewing these images as a backdrop to the garden, without the painted frames we see elsewhere, is one of immersion, it is as if the 'real' garden is part of an expansive mythological world.<sup>543</sup> Hunting was associated with the leisure afforded by escaping the city into a boundary-blurred world of reality, myth and gods. For some very wealthy Romans it was possible to come even closer to this world by owning large estates for hunting, whilst for urban households paintings were a symbolic association with that sphere. In this sense we should view hunting as another pastoral motif; although hunting scenes could reflect reality to some extent, in domestic imagery they are a way to bring rusticity, exoticism and Hellenism into an urban, civilised and Roman context, much like the statues of Priapus so frequently depicted in domestic landscape scenes. Priapus may serve to remind us of this context in two small painted scenes from House VI.15.8 at Pompeii (Figure 104). Both of these small paintings on a red background were set in large white frames and depict a basic Priapus herm alongside hunting scenes featuring a deer and a dog. Despite being a rural activity, hunting was bound in the Roman imagination to concepts of urban sophistication. Painted scenes of hunting in the apparent wild were literally bordered by pictorial frames on internal walls or decorated the boundaries themselves. They were popular scenes on the intercolumnar walls in peristyles just as elite hunting grounds themselves were surrounded by an enclosure wall; this both protects the contents and contains them in order to protect others.<sup>544</sup>

We know from landscape painting that water was an essential feature of the fantasy landscape and real *horti* and domestic gardens were no different. The importance of water is clear in most decorative landscape scenes, which usually include water in the form of a river or the sea in the foreground of the image, as we have seen in the Boscotrecase sacral idyllic landscape and the depiction of the Nile (Figures 85 and 92). Occasionally they even feature water as the main component of the scene; for example, images such as the silver cup from Avenches examined in

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<sup>543</sup> Zanker and Ewald 2012: 148 describe this as an intermingling of real space and a mythological world so that they all become one to the viewer and the space becomes immersive.

<sup>544</sup> Mazzoleni 2004.



**Figure 104:** Painted hunting vignette from House VI.15.8 at Pompeii.

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

Chapter Three (Figure 31) on which a landscape featuring an offering to Priapus also features a seascape and a boat. Water was a highly significant part of any landscape and any property of standing. Priapus was strongly associated with water, for example in Chapter Two it was shown that he protected fishermen. We have seen that the House of the Vettii had elaborate water features, including a Priapus fountain, but water in the Roman domestic context was a luxury, as it was necessary to create elaborate plumbing and engineering to bring water into the home or garden.<sup>545</sup> Hannah Platts suggests that control over water was associated with political power, as you needed both wealth and influence to ensure a water supply capable of powering extravagant water features.<sup>546</sup> For example, Pliny the Younger, in a letter to Licinius Sura, describes an elaborate construction in the form of a stream which flows into a banqueting room and provides a cool and pleasant feature.<sup>547</sup> Priapus in these landscapes and domestic spaces, despite his humble appearance, is associated with the luxury goods and artificial landscape management, such as water, required to assert one's status as a member of urban society. The many bridges we see in landscapes, like the Boscotrecase sacral-idyllic landscape may serve as a reminder of that influence.

### ***Architecture and landscape***

Landscape images frequently depict worlds full of architecture, which often take the form of sacred temples or crumbling monuments, but some Roman landscape paintings that depict Priapus reflect an emerging taste for landscapes that show substantial buildings, contemporary structures and, in particular, coastal villas. The growing importance of architecture and landscape construction in villa

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<sup>545</sup> See Vannesse 2012 and Zarmakoupi 2014 for a discussion of water supplies to villas.

<sup>546</sup> Platts 2010: 250-1.

<sup>547</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 4.30.



**Figure 105:** Corridor F-G at the Villa Farnesina. Rome, National Roman Museum.

Photo: Amphipolis (National Museum 46) [CC BY-SA 2.0 (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/2.0/>)], via Wikimedia Commons [accessed 15/04/18].

and *horti* may be reflected in decorative imagery that features Priapus as part of a scene with lots of un-spoiled architectural elements.

Villa landscapes were increasingly popular from the mid-first century BCE onwards. They primarily focus on architecture often set by a waterway, reflecting the popularity of building lavish elite villas near the coast.<sup>548</sup> It seems unlikely that most of these landscapes represent specific villas but they do show an interest in ‘descriptive realism’ in that they create an illusion of contemporary reality through a combination of standard motifs and recognisable details.<sup>549</sup> These landscapes are themselves a fantasy, combining elements that would not be out of place in a contemporary villa landscape with those from pastoral and Nilotic landscapes. They could suggest a growing interest in celebrating the wealth of Rome that has allowed the accumulation of affluence required to construct these villas. On a smaller scale, patrons could take part and ‘own’ a luxury villa on a painting in their town house without owning a ‘real’ villa estate.

Villa landscapes are a fictional depiction of a ‘real’ type of place that is itself an imitation of a fantasy landscape. From the first century BCE, villa estates began to blur the ‘real’ boundaries between the lived spaces of house, garden and farm, and the surrounding landscapes of countryside, woodland or sea.<sup>550</sup> They did this both by visually constructing views and by creating experiences for visitors in which various elements of the estate blurred together or replicated other spaces. Within rooms

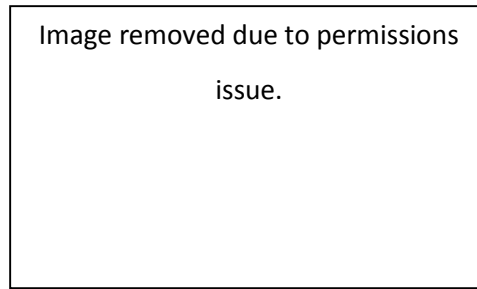
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<sup>548</sup> Ling 1991: 146-7 defines a villa landscape as having architectural types that ‘reflect the luxury of contemporary Italy’ and says it is typical for them to have ‘grand colonnaded façades’ overlooking gardens or waterfronts.

<sup>549</sup> Bergmann 1991: 49-51; Ling 1991: 147 also notes that villa landscapes render the sea, sky and perspective more realistically, however, he goes too far in stating that these landscapes are not idealised at all.

<sup>550</sup> Littlewood 1968: 9.





**Figure 106:** Detail of panel in corridor F-G, Villa Farnesina. Rome, National Museum.  
Photo: Spencer 2010: 151.

multiple references in the landscape decoration could stimulate viewers into believing they are in several places (and in several temporal dimensions) at once. Thus, all the themes in landscape scenes we have explored so far in this chapter could be relevant individually or active simultaneously, thereby blurring boundaries between discrete elements and layers of representation.

In some cases, images appear to represent both the distant sacral-idyllic world and contemporary architecture simultaneously, for example a complex sacral-idyllic landscape painting from corridor F-G at the Augustan Villa Farnesina on the banks of the Tiber. This curved corridor, which connected the south wing of the villa to the grand central hemi-cycle, was decorated with a variety of landscape and 'still-life' rustic scenes, each with their own slender frame, and is in many ways reminiscent of a gallery space (Figure 105). The scene situated at the far end of the corridor, essentially in the hemi-cycle itself, depicts many typical *topoi* of sacral-idyllic painting, a rocky, tree filled landscape interspersed with architectural features, shrines and grazing animals provides the central focus of this scene. However, the margins contain a variety of notable features; at the far right of the image a Priapus statue sits atop a tall pillar overlooking a shrine with statue, probably dedicated to Isis-Fortuna, and a band of dancing figures underneath an awning stretched between the shrine and Priapus' column (Figure 106). Again, we see Priapus clearly associated with an ambiguous landscape in which sacral-idyllic, Nilotic and villa landscape motifs all play a part. Here the Egyptianising decoration is subsumed into a fantasy landscape that is inherently Roman and Priapus emphasises the Roman tradition in the midst of the exoticism.

In the background of the left of the image is a grand colonnaded *porticus*. Spencer has suggested that this may represent the Saepta Julia, a contemporary building in Rome, which would have been



in view of the villa across the river.<sup>551</sup> It is almost as if the viewer is looking through the frame and the painting to a 'real' scene, as if the frame were in fact a window. Yet, the scene contains many elements that make it clear that this is not a window onto contemporary reality, not least the light, sketchy quality of the image which makes it seem as if the *porticus* is floating on the surface of the image and the incorporation of Priapus' statue. If this scene does contain a reference to the Saepta Julia it is potentially highly political; the building was conceived by Julius Caesar as a place for the *comitia tributa* to gather and cast votes. Completed after his death in 26BCE, it was used for a variety of functions, including as an arena under Augustus. The use of this building in a landscape could be interpreted in several ways, but it at the very least shows that landscape paintings could be highly reflective of contemporary issues around empire and conquest. Priapus creates ambiguity about temporality and place that allows for the juxtaposition of Egyptian ritual with contemporary Rome, literally bringing the empire and the city into the same space by framing them together in a rustic landscape.

This exemplifies the ways in which real architectural features were used to frame both painted and 'real' landscape. In other examples, grottoes and windows form frames for diners to view the landscape outside. Pliny the Younger's description of his seaside villa at Laurentum shows how windows and architectural features, like porticoes, were used as frames to create living landscape pictures. In a letter to Gallus he describes the villa in detail, including an extensive list of the views available from different spaces, of one room, which he describes as part of his favourite suite, he says;

It is large enough to hold a couch and two arm-chairs, and has the sea at its foot, the neighbouring villas behind, and the woods beyond, views which can be seen separately from its many windows or blended into one.<sup>552</sup>

This suggests that making nature part of the domestic world was important in elite villa design; Pliny tells us that he built this specific suite of rooms himself.<sup>553</sup> The variety and the choice this affords the viewer suggests a power over nature on their part, they can neatly box nature into landscape genres through their architectural constructions. Priapus can be part of all of these landscapes at once. This

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<sup>551</sup> Spencer 2010: 150-151.

<sup>552</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.21-22. Trans. Radice 1969.

<sup>553</sup> Plin. *Ep.* 2.17.

way of framing multiple views in a single room is also replicated in painting; we have seen various views of the Nile in the House of the Ceii, and in the House of the Priest Amandus, the room decorated with the pastoral scene of Polyphemus, Galatea and Priapus also has scenes of Daedalus and Icarus in a coastal villa landscape, Hercules in the Garden of the Hesperides and Perseus freeing Andromeda in a rocky pastoral/costal landscape similar to that surrounding Polyphemus (Figures 107-109). This allowed the viewer to contemplate myths in a variety of compositions mirroring those found in an extensive villa estate, namely; cultivated gardens, the coast, rocky woodlands and villas. All of these landscapes represent liminal spaces in one way or another, but framing them distances them and offers protection to the viewer whilst bringing them into the domestic sphere and bringing the spaces of the elite villa into the more modest house.<sup>554</sup> Priapus, like the nature in these landscapes, has also been civilised by his incorporation into sophisticated Roman spaces, to the point that he can symbolise man within 'wild' landscapes. This raises the question as to whether Priapus has been 'tamed' by Roman man – just like the landscape. His static form and lack of physical agency in most imagery could suggest that this is the case. This tendency shows a domestication of nature, whether on a small scale in an urban garden or within a large villa estate.<sup>555</sup>

Priapus has the potential to bring together the numinous world of the sacral-ideal landscape and the contemporary villa. In imagery it is often clear that Priapus is associated with the oldest, most primeval parts of the landscape, his close visual association with rocks and gnarled old trees only serves to emphasise this. This association can also be seen on gems showing priapic cult in Chapter One, or the plaque of Priapus and Pan in which the tree almost seems to grow out of Priapus (Figure 89). Within villa estates trees retained, to some extent, their association with an ancient, pious time and villa owners not only curated 'sacred' groves to replicate the imagery seen in sacral idyllic landscape images but we also hear of people keeping trees in homes that pre-date the building because they are links to old landscape.<sup>556</sup> Columella conflates the two in his recommendation that gardens have 'an old tree to worship as the godhead Priapus.' Further, he calls this an 'eternal presence' which suggests both Priapus and trees transcend time.<sup>557</sup> Columella is writing about

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<sup>554</sup> The House of Marcus Lucretius (V.4.a) at Pompeii also had a garden constructed on various levels to be viewed through multiple rooms and windows, the floor of the triclinium was even raised to improve the view over the garden and to create steps that the visitor must progress to on the way to the garden. Discussed in Bergmann 2008.

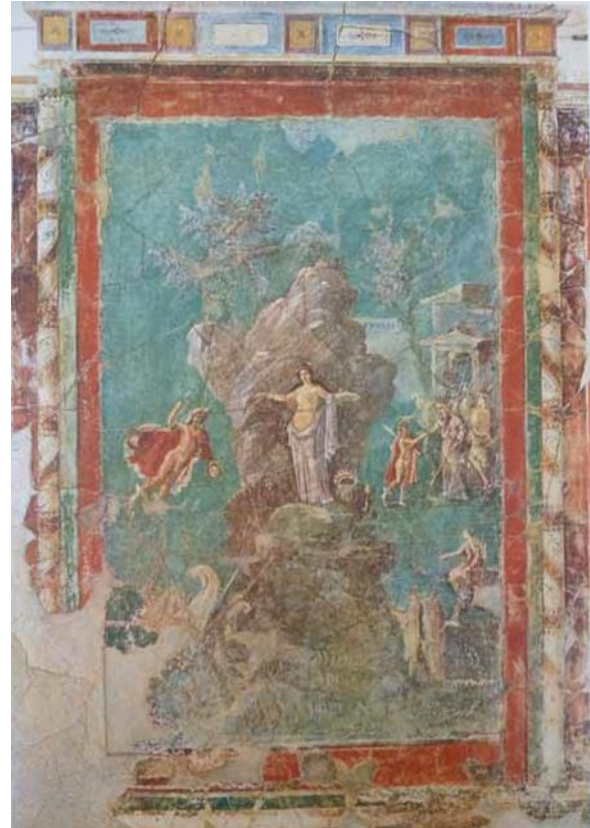
<sup>555</sup> D'Ambra 1998: 130.

<sup>556</sup> Bergmann 2002: 93.

<sup>557</sup> Columella. *Rust.* 10.32-3; see Henderson 2002 for full discussion of Columella and gardens.



**Figure 107:** Icarus fresco from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 108:** Perseus and Andromeda fresco from the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].



**Figure 109:** North wall of the *triclinium* of the House of the Priest Amandus at Pompeii (I.7.7).  
 Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn [www.pompeiiinpictures.com](http://www.pompeiiinpictures.com) [accessed 15/04/18].

agriculture so this sentiment is very much about controlling nature, as all agriculture is; this reminds us that Priapus is always associated with some form of controlling nature, even when surrounded by shepherds or in orchards he is emblematic of the fact that although basic these are still achievements of the progress of man. Like the trees, however, the ancient power of Priapus has been brought indoors through the use of his image within frames. As Rhiannon Evans has suggested, domesticating nature and bringing it inside makes the control over nature permanent.<sup>558</sup> The landscape around villas was also selected or constructed to progress from human elements such as a villa building through gardens and vineyards to the sacred world of woodlands and wilderness.<sup>559</sup> In the *Silvae*, composed at the height of villa landscape popularity in the first century CE, Statius combines the fantasy of the mythological pastoral with contemporary villa architecture, he describes the villa of Pollio Felix as being in country 'dear to Bacchus' and with fields protected by Hercules.<sup>560</sup> Even Galatea plays in the sea below the villa, mirroring the landscapes of Priapus and Polyphemus, but the implication is very much that this land has been mastered despite all of the connection to the gods; the farmland is described as being claimed from the sea and the pastoral poets are forced to retreat from the hills. In this case the powerful, pastoral gods have yielded to Roman cultivation and help with Roman prosperity.<sup>561</sup> Priapus' visual presence in the villa suggests that nature and the gods of nature have been tamed; the way Priapus is used in pastoral landscapes and domestic spaces shows the Roman dominance over the natural world and the ability to use cultural references selectively to perform that power.

### Performance and Landscape

As we have seen, throughout the home decorative landscapes were not only used as static decoration; they interacted with the space around them to create and define the 'real' landscape. They also provided the backdrop for performance both in the domestic and in the public sphere. Gardens could be used as mythical landscapes to provide a backdrop for performances, for example we have seen in Chapter Three that the myth of Orpheus was performed in the garden of Quintus Hortensius, similarly Suetonius tells of Tiberius' Capri where boys and girls dressed as Pan and nymphs solicited in woods and groves, literally turning the island into an escapist fantasy

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<sup>558</sup> Evans 2003: 304.

<sup>559</sup> Bergmann 2002: 99.

<sup>560</sup> Stat. *Silv.* 2.2.

<sup>561</sup> Stat. *Silv.* 2.2.

landscape.<sup>562</sup> Performance and spectacle were overwhelmingly popular in Roman urban centres and the sphere of performance is one in which the boundaries between reality and artifice are deliberately and emphatically blurred.<sup>563</sup> Landscapes provide evocative backdrops that help to frame the action and to set a scene familiar enough to the audience to provide a context for the drama, particularly the pastoral world. In this sense, the landscapes are highly ambiguous; artificial backdrops designed to provide a sense of ‘realism’ whilst simultaneously providing a quickly understandable context by reminding the viewer of established pictorial traditions and mythological worlds. Like the pastoral world of Priapus, gardens and theatres are constructed as spaces of ‘temporal dissonance’ where time and place are ambiguous and constantly shifting.<sup>564</sup> As we have previously noted, Priapus’ presence in landscape spaces is ambivalent; is he protecting the viewer or trying to draw in the viewer; has he been tamed, or like nature does he still pose an underlying threat? These questions are no less pertinent in the kaleidoscopic world of performance.

### ***The stage and the decoration of the home***

In Chapter Two we saw that Priapus is often linked to the bawdy world of mime performance. It has been suggested that Ovid’s accounts of Priapus and Vesta and Priapus and Lotis, in the *Metamorphoses*, are related to the performance of those stories in the theatre.<sup>565</sup> In which case it is likely that Priapus appeared as a character on stage, perhaps in a mime or satyr play, and we have seen a statuette that may represent an actor playing him in Chapter Two (Figure 50). However, as in painted landscapes, Priapus was most likely present on the stage to help set the scene for the audience and to represent the viewer. It seems that the story of Polyphemus and Galatea, with which we started this chapter, was performed as a mime or pantomime. If so it possibly had a painted backdrop with at least some of the elements of the landscape paintings we have examined.<sup>566</sup> Vitruvius makes it clear that the painted backgrounds for satyr plays should contain many of the *topoi* we have seen in landscape painting; ‘trees, caves, hills, and of the rural objects in

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<sup>562</sup> Suet. *Tib.* 43.2. Also see Newby 2012; Kuttner 1999a: 99. We should be cautious about using such anecdotes for evidence of behaviour as they are overwhelmingly negative but they do suggest that dressing up in various landscapes did happen. We also know that the Romans dressed up criminals in the arena as a way of combining execution and performance, see Coleman 1990 for a detailed introduction to this.

<sup>563</sup> Bergmann 1999.

<sup>564</sup> Giesecke 2016: 235.

<sup>565</sup> Ingleheart 2008.

<sup>566</sup> Winsor Leach 1992: 72.

imitation of nature.<sup>567</sup> It is possible, since Priapus commonly features among these landscape tropes in other spaces, that Priapus too featured as part of the backdrop in Roman performance.<sup>568</sup> The so-called 'Satyr Play Reliefs', examined in Chapter Three, are often said to represent different elements of a satyr play (Figure 77). Here, the landscape provides a frame of two registers, the top dominated by a large tree.<sup>569</sup> A link to the theatre is made explicit in the mask held by the partially nude woman in the upper register, while a statue of Priapus watches satyrs in the bottom register. If they do depict elements of a play these reliefs, suggest that a statue of Priapus could be a common part of the stage setting for the bawdy world these plays were located in.<sup>570</sup> These reliefs were also found near to the auditorium in Maecenas' *horti* and so may have been part of a theatrical space. Therefore, the scenery of these plays would closely mirror other images of the mythical, pastoral world in which, as we have seen, Priapus is a common feature of the landscape. The Satyr-Play reliefs could also be a fantastical representation of a landscape rather than a representation of a performance. However, they associate Priapus with the world of the theatre through their imagery. We cannot be sure whether the depiction of Priapus in association with performance is an indication that he was present as a character, prop or scene painting but it is more relevant that he is included in artistic representations as his presence suggests that many of these landscapes that frame theatrical scenes were thought of as part of a broader fantasy world. Priapus is an integral part and a key signifier to viewers that this landscape is a place of the blurred boundaries and ambiguities of this fantasy.

It is not surprising that Priapus should be associated with the theatre, and we have seen elsewhere that he is depicted in scenes with masks and other theatrical imagery, one example from Herculaneum, explored as a mythological image in Chapter Three, shows a partially draped Galatea within a small framed fresco that has large theatrical masks outside it and a frame that looks as if the image is set into a recess (Figure 64). She is in a landscape of small shrines and herms, most prominently a phallic herm of Priapus takes centre stage as she turns to look at a lover. The scene is

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<sup>567</sup> Vitruvius, *De arch.* 5.6.9.

<sup>568</sup> Panayotakis 2008 shows that it is likely that Virgil's *Eclogues* were performed; Priapus would seem an appropriate prop or inclusion in a landscape backdrop for such performances, particularly *Eclogue* 7 in which he is explicitly referenced.

<sup>569</sup> Hartswick 2004: 14 Plane trees are from the east and have connotations of sanctuaries and gymnasia.

<sup>570</sup> Heinemann 2011 argues that these reliefs depict initiation rituals and cult sanctuaries but the many mythological elements to the scene make this unlikely. Instead they scene evokes the world of Bacchic figures and cult surroundings that we have seen elsewhere.

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**Figure 110:** Mask detail.  
Fresco depicting Galatea from  
Herculaneum. Naples,  
National Archaeological  
Museum.

Photo:  
<https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/acis.html> [accessed 28/04/18].

reminiscent of pantomime in which dramatic mythological episodes were staged.<sup>571</sup> This picture could almost be viewed as a window opening onto a dramatic vignette, Priapus sets the mythological scene, as well as emphasising the erotic and the theatrical mask heightens the sense of drama (Figure 110). As part of Bacchic imagery, Priapus would be a natural fit in the imagery of the theatre but further than this as a figure associated with boundaries, liminality and ambiguity Priapus has much in common with the uncertain, ever-changing status of the theatre and performance and brings some of these unpredictable traits into the home.

Vitruvius explicitly tells us that the decoration of Roman homes was influenced by stage sets, including satiric scenes amongst a variety of other landscapes:

They depicted the facades of scenes in the tragic, comic, or satyric style; and their walks, on account of the great length, they decorated with a variety of landscapes, copying the characteristics of definite spots. In these paintings there are harbours, promontories, seashores, rivers, fountains, straits, fanes, groves, mountains, flocks, shepherds,.... with landscape backgrounds, and other subjects reproduced on similar principles from real life.<sup>572</sup>

This description clearly corresponds to the landscapes we see in homes. It suggests that theatrical scenery and landscapes were both used in domestic decoration, perhaps with little to distinguish

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<sup>571</sup> Hall 2008.

<sup>572</sup> Vitr. *De arch.* 5.2. Trans. Morgan 1960.

them clearly and, certainly, with overlapping points of reference. We can see that the stage potentially influenced domestic decoration and popular depictions of myths in the domestic world may have influenced stage performances. Once again, we see an area in which boundaries between fantasy and reality are blurred; Priapus is a useful part of such a space to signal this potential ambiguity. For example, the fresco from Boscotrecase contains most the features outlined by Vitruvius (Figure 86).<sup>573</sup> Looking at such images did viewers think of themselves as in the domestic space, in the sacral-idyllic landscape or in the theatre? The range of potential levels of interpretation emphasises the ambiguity and the possibility that the viewer may find themselves immersed as part of the spectacle with Priapus to remind them of the danger of this. In theatrical spaces, and domestic spaces that replicate them, Priapus with his multifaceted character (Roman and Greek, urban and rustic, primitive and sophisticated) serves as a reminder that masculine identity is always at risk when reality and fiction are blurred.

Landscapes, reminiscent of theatrical scenes, break down boundaries between reality and artifice by replicating something that was simultaneously a real object and artificial. Further to that, there are multiple frames in operation; a landscape painting that replicates the theatre is an artificial and framed image of something that itself framed a performance. Within the domestic setting the use of theatrical imagery also raises the question of what is a performance and what is 'real' within that space, ultimately it suggests that even within the home inhabitants and guests are always taking part in some kind of performance with landscapes within landscapes as their stage. Priapus' image may serve as a reminder of the instability of identity that comes with performance, those that took to the stage were ambivalent they were celebrities but effeminate and a threat to masculinity, they could also get swept up in characters losing control of their own identity.<sup>574</sup> The masculine, crude, traditional image of Priapus offers some grounding in how the male identity should be performed in an ambiguous territory.

We are not explicitly concerned with the theatre or amphitheatre here but how they in turn influenced domestic spaces and decoration. We can see that through landscape images with appropriate props, such as a herm of Priapus, performance was brought into the domestic world. As in many other cases, it seems that Priapus is associated with that ambiguous blurring of different

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<sup>573</sup> Ling 1991: 143 also suggests that the decorations at the Boscoreale Villa may have been influenced by stage decoration.

<sup>574</sup> Duncan 2006: 94-95 Pantomime actors, for example, had to become a range of characters within one performance.



worlds or spaces. As a figure of all kinds of landscapes and spaces Priapus could be used to bridge boundaries and to remind spectators that they may be in an uncertain space. The visual spectacle was obviously of the upmost importance in performance spaces and it is unsurprising that this influenced visual representations in other spheres, not least domestic decoration. As Bergmann argues, there was an active interchange between static art and performance: 'Painted and sculpted images provided spectacle producers with well-known meaningful symbols and their animation in live spectacles recharged the stories with topical meaning.'<sup>575</sup> It is, therefore, relevant to consider the influence of live performance on domestic images and to grasp how spectacle may help us further to understand the discourse that surrounds the use of landscape in domestic decoration.

### ***Spectacle and Danger in Landscapes***

Performances in the Roman world could take place in a wide variety of settings from the private dinner party to the busy street, but the most lavish spectacles were those of the amphitheatre. Here, audiences could expect a variety of different entertainments designed to thrill and surprise. The amphitheatre was a highly ambiguous space in which part of the excitement was the constant tension between performance and audience, and reality and artifice. The inclusion of Priapus in imagery that relates to spectacle in the amphitheatre further blurs these boundaries; images become multi-layered representations of performances that try to evoke a mythological world but in doing so begin to become part of that mythological realm. Priapus could be a prop or he could signify the viewer's (or audience's) transportation into the mythological pastoral world. If the garden brought to life simplistic pastoral landscape imagery, then the arena brought to life dramatic mythological landscapes.

The peristyle paintings from the House of the Gladiator have shown us that images of wild beasts could be associated with Hellenistic *paradesoi*. Christine Kondoleon suggests that they should also be considered as reminiscent of the arena which is where most patrons and their guests would see such animals.<sup>576</sup> Like mythological tableaux, hunts in the arena were often set within an artificial landscape of trees, rocks and streams used to create a sense of the hunt taking place in a natural environment. This not only enhanced the visual spectacle but also emphasised one of the central messages of such hunts; that man controls nature, in this case shown by the fact he subdues wild

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<sup>575</sup> Bergmann 1999: 26.

<sup>576</sup> Kondoleon 1995: 271-308.

beasts and can construct landscapes, such as forests, at will.<sup>577</sup> Further, once removed from the arena these animals are tamed in the form of domestic decoration.<sup>578</sup> Both the arena spectacle and images of animals in the home play with these burred boundaries between reality and artifice, the addition of Priapus in the frescoes from the House of the Gladiator adds further depth suggesting that not only are these animals part of a natural and wild landscape but that this landscape forms part of a mythological world. This kind of decoration can make a space seem limitless as the spectator looks at a space that does not exist materially; Mazzoleni calls this the ‘theatre of the imaginary.’<sup>579</sup> Priapus’ herm also suggests an element of control, much like a frame, he signals where these animals belong and, in that sense, mitigates the danger, if they are part of a civilised world of shrines and buildings they cannot be much of a threat. Much like Priapus these images are only encountered in a controlled environment, a painted frame in the domestic sphere, an enclosed peristyle or the walls of a park or amphitheatre.

It seems that in performance spaces Romans attempted to bring to life the pastoral landscape of the visual arts, such as the landscape of Polyphemus in the House of the Priest Amandus. In literature, the *Metamorphoses* of Apuleius provides a detailed account of the variety and spectacle of public games in the exotic eastern empire, particularly a mime of the Judgement of Paris. Although it does not feature Priapus specifically, we can see here that the landscape setting was of utmost importance and that complex mechanics were employed to bring the landscape to life: a mountain of wood was planted with living trees, a man-made stream flowed down it and real goats grazed it.<sup>580</sup> This ‘living’ landscape is reminiscent of many domestic paintings of landscape, including that of Polyphemus’ landscape in which we have also seen a shepherd on a mountain with goats, trees, and water features, as well as a herm of Priapus. It also brings to mind the artificial landscape of the garden that attempts to bring pastoral landscapes to life, however, the description itself is a piece of fiction so we are dealing with many layers of illusion that show how fond of contrived landscapes Romans were. Anne Duncan suggests that this blurring of mimesis and reality created a ‘thrill of

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<sup>577</sup> Tuck 2005 further links hunting and arena spectacle with attempt by the emperors to display *virtus* in the absence of military experience.

<sup>578</sup> Kondoleon 1995: 285.

<sup>579</sup> Mazzoleni 2004.

<sup>580</sup> Apul. *Met.* 10.29-32.



**Figure 111:** Stone statue of Priapus and a gladiator found at a tavern in Pompeii (I.20.1).

Photo: ©Jackie and Bob Dunn  
www.pompeiiinpictures.com [accessed 28/04/18].

transgression' as the stage or arena became indistinguishable from real life; performances involving wild animals are one example of this.<sup>581</sup>

In the domestic sphere it seems that landscape images could simultaneously play multiple roles, they may evoke the drama of a performance or arena spectacle but they also evoke mythical realms and immerse the guest in a fantasy. Perhaps this is reminiscent of the feeling of viewing a performance in the Roman world; attempts to make spectacle a way to bring mythological legends and characters to life are reflected in the way that houses use familiar visual language from spectacle to bring their own mini-mythological world to life for guests.<sup>582</sup> Some gardens, such as the *Horti Maecenas*, even had theatres for entertaining guests. The arena was also an important space for performing the self, advertising civic engagement to the public and asserting social status. Scenes within the home may subtly represent involvement, such as funding, in public spectacle and serve as a reminder of this.<sup>583</sup> Status and identity were key themes in performance spaces and the association with performance provided opportunities for individuals to display their masculine, elite status.

Priapus is also linked to the arena in a first century BCE statue from a tavern in Pompeii which depicts him as an ithyphallic herm with a *hoplomachus* gladiator, with sword drawn, draping his arm

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<sup>581</sup> Duncan 2006: 218.

<sup>582</sup> Wiseman 2016.

<sup>583</sup> Platts 2010: 242.

Image removed due to permissions issue.

**Figure 112:** Bronze gladiator helmet found at Pompeii. Naples, National Archaeology Museum. Photo: Nilsson 1957: 86.

over his head (Figure 111). In this composition, Priapus highlights the ambiguous identity of gladiators. Bergmann has suggested that the fighting of gladiators in the arena reaffirmed Roman notions of manliness as being 'tough' and 'brave'; in this sense Priapus with his connotations of virility and Romanness may be an appropriate companion.<sup>584</sup> There is also potentially an erotic and performative aspect at play here. Since gladiators were considered highly sexualised and desirable, Priapus' phallic display may unsuitably suggest the attractiveness of this gladiator.<sup>585</sup> The most basic function of this pairing may have been to advertise the amusements available at a nearby tavern which would also have played upon their erotic connotations.<sup>586</sup> Despite the many positive inferences of the image of the gladiator, Priapus also emphasises the dualities of the character; although virile and attractive the gladiator was also effeminised by the use of his body, and although powerful in the arena he was politically impotent and unable to partake in society.<sup>587</sup> Priapus' phallus may, therefore, also mock the lack of agency in the gladiator and reassert the male privilege of the citizen. Priapus is further associated with gladiators in the decoration of a gladiator helmet from Pompeii, Priapus is shown as a herm in a rustic setting being worshipped, mirroring the traditional type of scene we have explored in Chapter One (Figure 112). This may suggest an interest on the part of the gladiator in demonstrating his place in a world of Roman history and *mores*. We have seen that images of worshipping Priapus were particularly associated with longevity and historical 'Romanness'. Much like freedmen, this suggests gladiators may have had a desire to present themselves through a shared visual culture and claim a place within it, even if the elites tried to exclude them from fully partaking in society.

The domestic sphere had many elements that emulated the theatrical on a smaller scale for private entertainment. This shows further crossing of boundaries between venues and occasion as the house or garden became theatre and borrowed the events of public holidays for individual display.

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<sup>584</sup> Bergmann 1999: 22.

<sup>585</sup> Ewigleben 2000: 133; Duncan 2006: 212 graffiti shows that gladiators were sexually attractive.

<sup>586</sup> Ewigleben 2000: 133.

<sup>587</sup> Barton 1993: 47-54.

We have already seen how, at Trimalchio's dinner party, an image of Priapus reflected the drama of the arena by spraying saffron at guests.<sup>588</sup> We should see images within domestic spaces as similar attempts to bring some of the emotional and immersive effects of the theatre or amphitheatre into the home. Priapus offers a key indicator that the space or image is not necessarily as it would first appear. A knowledge of the popular entertainments of Rome may seem far removed from the more 'high-brow', Greek-inspired leisure activities that patrons often wished to display in their homes, but the visual imagery of Roman performance could demonstrate an understanding of both the mythological basis for the entertainments and the importance of seeing and being seen in Roman culture. We have seen in previous chapters, particularly Chapter Two, that Priapus often juxtaposes high and low brow, and therefore he is emblematic of this tension in popular entertainment which is reflected in the way in which lowly shepherds perform sophisticated song in the pastoral landscape.

### ***Performance in the Pastoral World***

Pastoral landscapes in both painting and literature often frame performance within the narrative and we can see the influence of 'real' life entertainment in mythological landscape depictions. As we have seen in the painting from the House of the Priest Amandus, Polyphemus is depicted performing song to woo Galatea and his position in the centre of the rocks effectively creates an arena for him. Ovid also speaks of Polyphemus picking out the perfect spot to maximise his performance.<sup>589</sup> Winsor Leach argues that rather than representing the story as told in Hellenistic literature, landscape paintings of Polyphemus and Galatea may in fact represent popular performances.<sup>590</sup> Further, she suggests that a particular Roman interest in the power of art is at play here, placing the emphasis on the power of art to affect its audience and placing this art within a civilised context.<sup>591</sup> In Figure 92 we have seen that Polyphemus was successful in seducing Galatea and his pipes lay beside them to emphasise the importance of his song.<sup>592</sup> We see this in the landscape paintings that create an auditorium of rocks but also suggest a human civilisation of some kind in the background through the inclusion of Priapus and buildings, like the painting from the House of the Priest Amandus.<sup>592</sup> Priapus too is a form of civilised art, albeit one deliberately curated to look unrefined, and his

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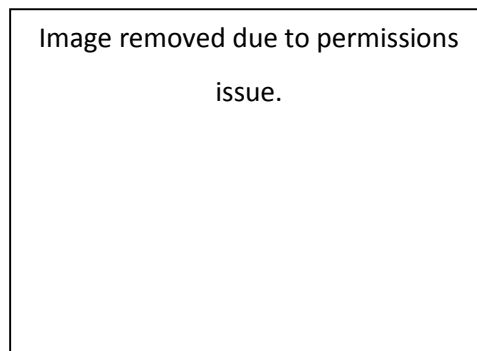
<sup>588</sup> Petron. *Sat.* 2.9.60.

<sup>589</sup> Ov. *Met.* 13.780.

<sup>590</sup> Winsor Leach 1992: 74.

<sup>591</sup> Winsor Leach 1992: 74.

<sup>592</sup> Purcell 1987: 193 has suggested that the shape of actual theatres in the ancient world was very much based on natural slopes and spaces.



**Figure 113:** Detail of marble Pan and Daphnis statue showing the pan pipes. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.

Photo: <https://greekgodpan.wordpress.com/category/pan-artworkphotography/page/4/> [accessed 28/04/18].

presence in performance imagery serves to remind the viewer of the fact that this world and performance are constructions of human culture.

Priapus is frequently associated with music and performance, particularly pipes, the chosen instrument of shepherds. We have already noted the inclusion of Priapus and pipes in the relief sculpture in the Hermitage and a statue in Naples depicts Priapus as part of the landscape decorating the pipes held by the shepherd Daphnis, the founder of pastoral song, and Pan tries to seduce him (Figure 113). The rest of the decoration shows Pan and Eros fighting and the combination of Priapus, Pan and Eros is an emphatic reminder of the erotic potential of the pastoral world.<sup>593</sup> Other images show a herm of Priapus on a rock being played to by Pan or a satyr with a lyre, a flute or pipes (Figure 114). These musical exploits show that the pastoral landscape was very much considered as an arena for performance; we have also seen this reflected in the literature in which song is ever present.<sup>594</sup> Rather than performing himself, Priapus is the audience and reminds us that these spectacles are part of another world with an abundance of luxury goods and leisure

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<sup>593</sup> Priapus is also linked with the eroticism of Daphnis throughout the pastoral literature; in Theocretan Idylls, for example, he pursues him in *Idyll* 3 and he offers advice on seducing him in Tibullus 1.4.

<sup>594</sup> Priapus is also frequently associated with music in cult scenes like those explored in Chapter One. This may suggest that in this scene Pan is to be imagined worshipping the herm of Priapus (for example see Guiraud 2003: 147); alternatively it could resemble the poetry in which shepherds sit beside herms of Priapus to compose their songs.

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**Figure 114:** Silver Pan and Priapus. 1st century BCE - 1st century CE. Naples, National Archaeology Museum.  
Photo: Mattusch 2008: 120.

time, and with a highly charged erotic ambience. In such scenes he fulfils the role, suggested by Marin, of a presence in the frame that tells the spectator *how* to look.<sup>595</sup>

The *Eclogues* particularly demonstrate the importance of song in the world of the pastoral, characters frequently communicate through song, play a variety of instruments (but especially pipes and flutes) or engage in singing contests. In *Eclogue 7* we have encountered one such singing contest between Thyrsis and Corydon; the contestants take it in turn singing of the pastoral world they live in and invoking various deities, including Priapus who is promised a gold statue if the flock prospers. Here the tension exists between the rusticity of the characters and subject matter, and the use of sophisticated verse form and language. Any sense of these men being 'real' shepherds is undermined by their familiarity with elaborate poetics and use of Theocretan allusions, as well as the suggestion that they could purchase a gold statue.

Performance and contest are at the heart of bucolic poetry and, although they evoke a world of leisure, the presence of urban and manly Priapus as the audience perhaps hints at the realities of competition within Roman society.<sup>596</sup> The domestic environment was always a space for social ritual such as entertainment and, inevitably, there is always a performative aspect to this.<sup>597</sup> Perhaps it is unsurprising that, in a space where the need to perform and impress was paramount, patrons chose decorative landscapes that reflected the importance of performance whether that is in mythology, bucolic singing competitions or the theatre and arena.

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<sup>595</sup> Marin 1996: 82.

<sup>596</sup> Hunter 2006: 25.

<sup>597</sup> Gazda 2010: xvi.

Reality and artifice are clearly key tensions in landscapes of performance, as they are in the other landscapes we have explored. As spectacle strove for even greater reality, as Martial said ‘whatever fame sings of, the arena makes real’,<sup>598</sup> the artificiality becomes ever more poignant with props or images of Priapus highlighting the man-made nature of the landscape and the fantasy enacted within it. The constructed ‘reality’ of this other world, both a mythological and decorative world, is in many ways fragile, open both to revelation as artifice and unpredictable swings in frame, it is always possible that the fantasy threatens the audience because of the lack of stability and the transgression of boundaries.

## Conclusion

We have seen in this chapter that Priapus could be deployed as a motif in a wide variety of landscapes and his image helped to associate those landscapes with different themes in Roman cultural discourses. In many visual and poetic landscapes, Priapus is a work of art framed within another work of art, and thus doubly shows his allegiance to man-made civilisation. This should also put us in mind of the ways in which such landscapes were displayed, for example the corridor at the Villa Farnesina, we examined earlier, is reminiscent of a picture gallery, or *pinacoteca*, which makes explicit the various frames involved in viewing these landscapes and specifically highlights man’s ability to contain the wildness of nature. Painting and decoration within houses that show rural life are in themselves a form of control; they bring the outdoors indoors and domesticate it within an urban frame. Similarly, foreign elements can be brought into the home but their corrupting influences are contained through the watchful eye of Priapus. In this sense, Priapus can be viewed as a watchman, working to keep man safe from potential dangers in the landscape. This reflects roles we have seen in Chapter One, as guardian of the garden, Chapter Two as apotropaic deity and Chapter Three as protector from the corruption of luxury.

Priapus’ nature as an artwork also serves to remind the viewer that they are viewing art not reality. Priapus is very much man-made and a piece of art: he represents civilisation and even Roman man’s, dominance of nature through civilising arts and technology. Perhaps there is an element of Priapus’ representation that is symbolic of the balance between art and nature that was a prevalent part of the discourse around luxury. On the other hand, Priapus is also a highly ambiguous character and whilst protecting viewers he may also be blurring the boundaries and frames that allow them to become immersed in a fantasy world. In many landscapes, both represented and real, Priapus

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<sup>598</sup> Mart. *Spect.* 6 (5).4.



suggests that the landscape blurs boundaries, for example between the theatre and the home. Priapus makes all landscapes into a spectacle by acting as a static audience. He keeps cultural tensions at the forefront of the viewer's mind, he can bring the luxury painted border of an image into the enclosed rustic world by reflecting its Bacchic theme and he can bring humour into a dramatic narrative.

Landscapes in Roman art may seem like distant, numinous spaces but they are always artificial cultural constructs and the image of Priapus reminds the male Roman viewer of their ultimate control over that artificial world, which represents their empire, their past and their present, whilst suggesting that getting too caught up in the artifice is just as dangerous as the real wilderness.

## Conclusions

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This thesis set out to explore why the image of Priapus came to play a large part in the iconography of personal objects and domestic art of the late republic and early imperial period. Before taking on this study, although it was clear that Priapus featured in Roman decoration, it was not clear how much he spoke to cultural concerns of elite males. I have suggested that, although often depicted as a basic, rustic herm, the image of Priapus was in fact a playful and ambiguous creation of a sophisticated urban elite, used to reflect the changes in cultural values and the social makeup of the Roman world from the late republic onwards. I also sought to understand the unusual rendering of Priapus as an object and explore the significance of this as a visual trope.

### Summary

This thesis did not set out to understand the significance of images of Priapus to all of Roman society because as a traditional, hyper-masculine and yet urbane figure, as demonstrated throughout this thesis, the image of Priapus was particularly significant to the changing culture of elite Roman males, and those who emulated them.

We began by exploring the image of Priapus as evidence for a rustic fertility cult. Although there is little evidence for cult practice in the images it was clear that Priapus was visually associated with concepts of fertility and abundance. This visual imagery has been very influential in the reception of Priapus' image in the modern world where scholars have attempted to find evidence for primitive fertility cult which can carry connotations of purity or debauchery depending on the agenda of the writer. We, therefore, focused specifically on Priapus' image in the urban contexts of the Roman world to move away from the judgemental and titillating tendencies of the early scholarship of Priapus and found that his image was often used to evoke an idealised past that spoke to Roman ideals of piety, tradition and self-control. Thus, we showed that the crudely carved ithyphallic herms were in fact a representation of the *mores* of a highly sophisticated, literate and urban culture.

Chapter Two explored the other 'primitive' function often ascribed to images of Priapus, that of apotropaion. This chapter progressed from looking at liminal spaces to humour but the clear theme was that of masculinity. We saw that aggression and dominance were central to male identity in Roman culture; this was evident in the qualities needed to protect oneself and one's property but also in the performance of masculinity in the socio-political sphere. By looking at the humour directed at 'others', it became clear that through the first century BCE to the second century CE there was a significant amount of ambiguity, and therefore anxiety, about challenges to the

traditional ruling elite and how best to (re)assert their dominance. As a masculine but also ambiguous figure Priapus allowed a visual cultural outlet for exploration of these grey areas.

Discourses and representations of luxury were also closely tied to the need to assert status and define a new social hierarchy. Priapus' crude image seems incongruous with luxury items; however, his ambiguous position between Roman and eastern, rural and urban, and active and passive creates a figure open to interpretation and able to speak to a variety of cultural concerns. We found that *paideia*, imperialism and voyeurism were all significant elements in visual constructions of luxury and Priapus could represent the masculine power and privilege inherent in these concepts. Despite the 'feminine' characterisation of luxury, it was an essential part of performing a sophisticated form of Roman culture but performing in the right way with the right level of self-control was also vital.

Finally, we brought all of these contexts together to explore landscape imagery and the ways in which it creates a controlled environment within a frame. Within these landscapes Priapus could act as a rustic fertility deity, apotropaion and marker of luxurious leisure. However, he most significantly represents the presence of man in landscapes, both real and fantasy. His depiction as a specifically man-made object is a constant reminder of the power of the Roman male in these landscapes; whether they are sacred, erotic or exotic. On the other hand Priapus breaks down boundaries as well as asserting them. Where his image is present in landscape spaces we also find dissolution of the line between fantasy and reality that allowed for identity to be performed in a variety of ways. The ambiguity of Priapus creates this space, protects those in it and also reminds them of the need for a measure of control.

### **Possible Future Work**

This thesis could open the door to studying a variety of figures undervalued because of their decorative nature. Approaching such images from a Roman cultural perspective and trying to remove the judgement and morality of the preceding centuries, as we have done here, could help re-evaluate such other figures. The thesis has demonstrated the need to move away from dismissing figures as just one thing, for example, a fertility god or apotropaic talisman, and instead to understand the specific contexts they operate in. In Chapter One, we briefly explored the reception of images of Priapus in the modern era to provide context to the ways in which the subject is often approached. However, this thesis did not explore the modern reception of the images in any depth. The preliminary survey included here suggests that there could be interesting future work in this area.

Images in this thesis were sampled from different parts of the empire on the understanding that Roman culture was to some extent diffused throughout the empire and acted as a shared language amongst aspirational elites. There is scope, however, to extend the content of this thesis by looking at the geographical spread and local contexts in detail. There is also potential scope for understanding the relevance of the image of Priapus for 'others' in Roman society. We touched upon freedmen, women and slaves from the perspective of the dominating male culture and, although there is inevitably less evidence pertaining to these groups, there is still work that could be done in understanding how they would have experienced Priapus' image, as well as images of other hyper-masculine figures in Roman art.<sup>599</sup>

### **Contribution to Knowledge**

This thesis has shown that the image of Priapus was highly significant in articulating the tensions and discourses pertinent to the culture propagated by elite men. By exploring these images through thematic contexts for the first time we have found that representations of Priapus were highly ambiguous and that this was essential for their use in the display of Roman cultural values and masculinity. As society changed, or 'evolved' to use Galinsky's term, as the empire expanded, the political situation changed and social hierarchies became more fluid, there was a need for art that both displayed cultural conformity and interrogated the ways in which individuals could display status.<sup>600</sup> This thesis has demonstrated that the ambiguous image of Priapus allowed them to do this.

By moving away from the traditional interpretations of Priapus influenced by eighteenth and nineteenth century ideals, this thesis has found that the image of Priapus was not a reflection of rural cult or religious practice in the Roman world nor a degenerate symbol of loose morals but rather a reflection of the complex cultural discourses in the Roman society at a time of social change. In particular, his image is used in contexts that suggest that identity and status were pertinent concerns but, since they were fluid concepts open to constant renegotiation, they could not be addressed in a straightforward manner. We have seen that in this era self-display was a necessity both for those trying to retain traditional elite masculine status and those who wished to attain it. Priapus' image was an essential element of the art used to display masculinity, status and erudition.

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<sup>599</sup> Some have already suggested that women could have been involved in commissioning domestic art works, for example Gazda 2010: xvi and Silberberg-Pierce 1993: 28, and others such as Clarke 2003b, and Hackworth Petersen 2009 and 2006 have started to look at lower social status and freedmen.

<sup>600</sup> Galinsky 1996.

In many respects Priapus speaks to what was expected of Roman masculinity; virility, self-control and cultural sophistication.

Although, the image of Priapus was ostensibly masculine and virile we have seen that the appearance of Priapus can also contradict his masculine status. There is an inherent contradiction in the representation of a deity with an erect phallus and a plinth that restricts movement; Priapus is at once powerful and impotent in his image which emphasises the essential quality of his image as one of ambiguous masculinity and status, much like the Roman society he reflects.

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